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BEN BOVA

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The caves of the Dead Sea are not the only places where ancient Biblical scrolls are being unearthed. For example, here is an . . .

Apocryphal Fragment

By EDWARD WELLEN

AND Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, the same that on a time had said, Except I shall see on his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

This same Thomas was journeying south through the Negev to Elath, whence he would take passage to India. And in the heat of the day he spied an oasis but, except he should drink of the water on its pool and rest in the shade of its doom palms, he would not believe it was other than mirage.

Illustrated by SUMMERS

So he turned not aside, but stumbled on. And his toe struck a thing in the sand. After calling the name of the Lord, Thomas knelt to unearth the thing and, lo, it was a bottle, and, behold, the bottle bore upon its stopper the seal of Solomon, that wisest—womanwise—of men.

And Thomas took up the bottle and eyed it and saw through glass darkly only a smoke that swirled as he turned the bottle in the sun.

(Continued on third cover)

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Cover: GEORGE BARR
Illustrating *The Star Fisherman*

S. F. GREATS is published quarterly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 60¢ a copy. Subcription rates: One year (4 issues) U.S. and possessions: $2.00; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: $2.50; all other countries: $3.00. Copyright 1971 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Copyrighted 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co. All rights reserved.

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The STAR FISHERMAN

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Men have fought and died, sung and cried, stolen and lied for love. Christopher Stark did all of these—and more. Over his life loomed two gigantic images: that of the beautiful Priscilla, and that of the mysterious fisher-figure in the reaches of space.

And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.
—Deuteronomy 19:21

CHRISTOPHER Stark was an "almost" man. He was almost brilliant, he was almost tall, he was almost broad-shouldered, he was almost well-proportioned, and he was almost handsome. His self-image, on the other hand, was everything that he was not.

Now a self-image which is not reasonably in keeping with reality can become a tiger on a man's back. Christopher Stark's tiger clawed him incessantly, and sometimes the pain was too much for him to bear. He could never stop wanting to be something more than what he really was, and he could never stop trying to convince other people that he *was* something more than what he really was. He convinced quite a few of them in his day, and in the end, when he was dying, he even convinced himself.

When he was twelve years old he boasted to his boyhood sweetheart that someday he would buy himself a shining catamaran and set forth upon the Trans-solar Sea and cast his net into the black deep and snare a thousand

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fishes for her hair. His boyhood sweetheart eventually married the son of a sausage-maker and became a princess, but Chris, true to his word and true to his tiger, bought his catamaran and set forth and cast his net. Deep-space fishing was an occupation for which he was as ill-suited as he was for winning women, but thanks to his tiger he perfected it to a degree that put potentially greater fishermen to shame. He spurned the berths he could easily have obtained on the innumerable fishing-company trawlers and fished alone, and the catches that he brought in to the Tethys fisheries were tremendous. So were the hangovers that he took back with him to the Trans-solar Sea. As the years passed, he grew more and more contemptuous of his colleagues, and fished in ever deeper waters; and finally one day, in the autumn of his youth, he cast his net and snared a dead man.

Thus his story ended—and thus his story begins.

THE dead man was drifting in the Alpha Centauri Archipelago some ten million miles from a planet that, in common with its seven sisters, was just as dead as he was. Chris did not snare the body deliberately—he knew nothing of its presence, in fact, until he pulled in his net, and even then he did not recognize the bulky spacesuited figure entangled in the magnetic mesh for what it really was. Oftentimes ordinary meteors traveled with the much smaller, diamond-like variety that men coveted and that women wore in their hair, and it wasn't until after he dragged the net and its contents from the casting deck, through the outer and inner cargo locks and into the brightly illumined hold that he realized the true nature of his catch.

The minute he deactivated the magnetic field, the figure collapsed limply to the deck amid a shower of glittering "fishes." Carefully Chris unscrewed and removed the rime-coated helmet. The face down into which he gazed was the face of an old, old man; and yet, despite its cobwebbed eye-corners, its sunken cheeks and cadaverous complexion, it emanated a swiftly-fading radiance that cast doubt upon the recent death that the rolled-up eyes bespoke. Nevertheless, death had come, and it had come to stay, though whether it had come before or after its victim had been cast adrift in space was a question to which Chris could supply no answer.

He cut away the rest of the suit, revealing an age-shrunken body clad in leisure-class clothing that was much too large for it. Methodically he went through the pockets. They contained no

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identification of any kind, but they did contain a small roll of bluebacks. He also found a pen, an unwritten-in notebook, and a glossy new photograph. He threw the pen and the notebook away, and pocketed the bluebacks. They would compensate him partly at least for the full catch he had been robbed of. Finally he looked at the photograph.

He was never quite the same afterward.

IT was a photograph of a girl. A severe black dress enshrouded her from neck to ankles, and a black bonnet with an immaculate white brim imprisoned her hair. It was an ensemble designed to hide, rather than to enhance, feminine charms, and yet her loveliness flamed forth with a vividness that drove back the gray and brooding shadows of the room in which she stood. Her tawny hair peeped in waves and ringlets from the edges of its bonnet-prison, haloing her face and softening the superimposed sternness of her mouth and chin. The face itself was heart-shaped; the green eyes were wide-apart, as were the Slavic cheekbones. The cheeks were thinner than they should have been, and the nose was slightly turned up; but neither defect could disturb so close an approach to perfection. And as for the severe styling of her dress, it only served to define the flatness of her stomach and the fullness of her thighs, and to emphasize, with a sort of sartorial litotes, the fact that her breasts were in blossom.

Christopher Stark turned the photograph over with trembling hands. On the back, a name and address had been written in spidery, unsure letters: *Priscilla Petrovna, Miltonia, Europa.* Yes, he thought, it would have to be Europa, for where else but on Europa did women dress to drive men away? Where else but on Europa was sex synonymous with sin? He had never been there himself, but he had talked with star fishermen who had been. In the heavens of Europa, massive Jupiter brought to mind Heli itself, and as a result, Catholic, Protestant and Jew had merged to found a new Puritanism. It takes a puritanical god to cope with a visible hell, and on the barren plains of Europa the ghosts of John Milton and John Bunyan walked side by side, and woe betided those who crossed their paths.

Standing among the tiny piscine meteors that would someday adorn the hair and dangle from the pierced noses of the women of Earth, New Earth (nee Venus), and Tethys, standing beside the dead man who had robbed him of two-thirds of his

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catch; standing there in the hold of his robot-brained catamaran, rooted to the steel deck by his magnetic fishing boots, Christopher Stark looked at the photograph of the girl again and knew his destiny. The women in his life, other than those he had bought and paid for, had been few and far between, but there had been enough of them for him to know that the woman whose likeness he stood devouring now was the one for him.

He gazed down at the dead man. Her grandfather, probably; possibly her great grandfather. In either event, Priscilla Petrovna would be beholden to the man who returned him to Europa for a decent burial. He, Christopher Stark, would be that man. Supplies could be obtained on Europa from the N.E.S.N. contingent stationed there—at twice their original price, perhaps, but they could be obtained. And so could fuel. He needed both supplies and fuel, Christopher Stark did, and he needed something else far more. He needed love. He had needed it all his life, and the need had created an emptiness in him that he had been at a loss to understand till now.

HE kicked off his boots and slipped out of his tanks and togs; then he ascended the hatch ladder to the galley. From the galley it was but a few steps to the control room. As he stepped through the doorway the port-viewscreen caught his eye, and he stopped in his tracks, momentarily stunned.

He had never seen the constellation before. He had not known, in fact, that such a constellation existed.

The port-viewscreen employed a 100″ cathode tube and reduced objects to one-third of their actual size; and yet it was barely able to frame the star pattern that the port-camera was telecasting. The pattern delineated a macrocosmic star fisherman casting a macrocosmic net.

Compared to him, Orion was a pygmy, Andromeda, a baby girl. The stars of his arms and shoulders ran the gamut from red to blue, from giant to dwarf, from Population I to Population II. His eyes were supernovae, his hair was a cosmic storm. The pale blur of a distant island universe was his navel, and the nebula-pillars of his mighty legs caught and threw back the red-golf radiance of the Centauri trilogy. The net which he had just cast, and which seemingly had ensnared the catamaran, was compounded of a vast sprinkling of nearer stars, and through its interstices showed the coruscating waters of the sea of space.

Overwhelmed by grandeur too great for his mind to grasp,

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Christopher Stark involuntarily lowered his eyes. When he raised them again, the constellation was gone. And yet the parts that had constituted it still remained. The supernovae that had been the eyes were still there, and so was the cosmic storm that had been the hair. The island universe that had been the navel still pulsed faintly in the immensities, and the nebulae that had been the legs and torso still threw forth their red-gold glare. But now he saw each component out of context with the whole, and try as he would, he could not reattain the perspective that had enabled him to view the over-all design.

Had he really seen the constellation at all? he wondered, as he punched out a destination card for Europa. Or had his unconscious mind created a visual wish-fulfillment fantasy and tied it in with available phenomena? He did not know, and in all probability he never would. But there was one thing that he did know—

The star fisherman had been himself.

TO get mid twenty-third century Europa, take away Jest and youthful Jollity, and Sport that wrinkled Care derides. Take away warm sunlight and soft rains. Take away the singing of birds, and the flowers that appear on the earth, and take away the Grape that can with Logic absolute the Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute. Now throw a glowing acorn up into the sky and call it Sol. To get Miltonia, scatter a handful of small prefab huts over a frozen slough of despond, and add two large huts, one with a steeple that thrusts like a rusted needle into the brooding sky, the other with four ithyphallic stacks that emit a thick foul-smelling smoke. The hut with the steeple is the Neo-puritan Church, and the hut with the stacks is the factory where omazone, Miltonia's sole *raison d'etre*, is processed. To get Calvinville, Brownsville, Hutchinson's Corners and Bunyantown, repeat the *modus operandi* four times. Now arrange the five villages in a wide circle and place the Europa spaceport in the center. You have only three more props to go —the tower, where a reluctant contingent of the New Earth Space Navy maintains a round-the-clock tour of duty, the barracks where the off-duty personnel sleep, and the fuel house. Place the tower on the perimeter of the port, and dig two nearby holes. Bury the barracks in the first and the fuel house in the second.

Standing in the tower window, Christopher Stark watched the laborious approach of the snow-

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tractor over the windrowed plain. Preceding the tractor was a small snow-runabout driven by the messenger whom the tower operator had dispatched to Miltonia with the news that a ship had arrived bearing an unidentified dead man who had been found drifting in the Alpha Centauri Archipelago and who had had in his possession a photograph of Priscilla Petrovna. Upon the wide seat of the tractor sat two women and a man.

Chris waited till the brief caravan had almost reached its destination before he descended the tower stairs to the locks. After swallowing an oxygen tablet, he stepped out into the thin cold air. Despite the bulky parka that all but engulfed her, he identified Priscilla instantly, and it was she to whom he spoke when the tractor grunted to a stop. "I'm Christopher Stark," he said, handing her up the photograph. "I thought perhaps that the man I found might be your grandfather."

She took the photograph from him and gazed at it with green-gold eyes. Looking up at her, Chris drank deeply of her profile. Yes, she was the one, his heart sang. His whole being knew it now.

Presently she slipped the photograph into a pocket of her parka and looked down at him. "Wilt thou show us the body?"

He nodded, and she and the tall dour man who was her father and the short dumpy woman who was her mother climbed down from the seat, followed him into the tower and thence into the first-floor storeroom where the dead man, enshrouded in a tarpaulin, lay upon a makeshift bench. Chris uncovered the face, and the three Petrovnas looked down upon the frozen features for some time. At length Priscilla raised her eyes. "Wouldst thou mind leaving us alone for a moment, Mr. Stark?" she asked.

HE went out and stood in the late-afternoon dimness and tried to smoke a cigarette. The oxygen-starved atmosphere thwarted him, and he flung the butt at the sinking acorn-sun. Priscilla appeared at his elbow. "The body is that of my grandfather," she said. "My father's father. My mother's father died when she was still a child." She paused. Then, hesitantly, "Wouldst thou care to accompany us to our humble home and accept our hospitality during thy stay?" she asked. "It will be but small recompense for the service thou hast rendered us, but it is all we have to offer."

"Thank you," Chris said, barely able to control his exultation. Suddenly he gave a start and stared over her shoulder at the

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horizon. Pale fires were burning all along it, and a ghastly pallor was seeping into the sky.

Turning, Priscilla sought the cause of his consternation. Then, "Do not be alarmed," she said. "It is the planet Jupiter rising."

He watched it rise as he sat in the bed of the tractor beside the dead man on the way to Miltonia. It was in its full-phase, and at first it resembled a monstrous, banded mountain emerging from a petrified sea. Then the red spot appeared, and the simile was struck from his mind. No mountain this, but a vengeful Polyphemus with a single flaming orb. The metaphor, however, proved to be as ineffective as the simile. It was as though the heavens had been split asunder to make room for a vast and turbulent mass that was neither sun nor moon nor planet, but the incarnation of Hell, and as though that were not demoralizing enough, the surface of Europa took on, in the dull red radiance, the appearance of the valley of the shadow of death.

The tractor crawled through the shadow, the prayers of the three Petrovnas sounding above the grunting of the motor. Christopher Stark had never seen Jupiter at such close range before, and the religion which he had inherited from his middle-class parents—a religion compounded of reassuring sayings, Christmas trees, Easter bonnets, turkeys, cranberry sauce, and prosperity, and presided over by a benevolent, all-forgiving god—proved inadequate for the ordeal. On Europa you needed an unbending, eye-for-an-eye god—a god who could fight the devil on the devil's own ground and with the devil's own weapons—and it was as logical as it was inevitable that such a god should have come into being.

THE wake lasted seven days. On Europa, daylight and darkness were practically indistinguishable; nevertheless, the moon's eighteen-hour rotation period had been prorated into three equal portions—morning, afternoon, and night. Mornings, Priscilla's mother sat beside the dead man in the heatless shed that adjoined the Petrovna hut; afternoons, Priscilla's father sat with him; nights, Priscilla sat with him, and beside her sat Christopher Stark.

An unorthodox courtship, certainly—but no more unorthodox than it was fruitless. Christopher Stark talked, and Priscilla Petrovna listened. He talked of space and stars and fishes, and of the pleasure dome he would someday decree in an as yet undecided upon Xanadu. When these subjects evoked no response, he talked of the book he someday intended to write, and

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when the book got him nowhere, he surrendered to the frenzied clawing of his tiger and talked of the women he had known, augmenting their pitiful ranks with many he had not known, and while he did not say outright that all of them had been his for the taking, he broadly implied that such was the case. She gave him a long cold look, and the silence that ensued was even more embarrassing than its predecessors.

Finally, becoming desperate, he came right out and said what he wanted to say. It was the seventh and final night. During the day the temperature had risen slightly above the freezing mark, and the smell of death was in the room. "I realize," he began, "that a wake is a sacred thing, but love is sacred too, and since I'll be leaving tomorrow I think I'm justified in saying now that from the first moment I looked at your picture I've been in—"

Priscilla had risen to her feet. "Dost thou wish a glass of water?" she asked. "I will get thou one," she went on, without waiting for his answer.

When she brought it, he tried to touch her hand. She drew back from him as though he were a leper. Suddenly furious, he seized her arms and pulled her against him. The glass of water fell from her fingers and shattered on the floor. He kissed the curls that peeped from her bonnet. He kissed her forehead. He kissed her lips. The stench of the dead man intensified, hovered like malefic vapor in the room.

At last he released her and stepped back. Her face was white, her body rigid. In contrast with her marmoreal aspect, little golden fires were burning in her eyes. He could almost hear the crackling of their tiny flames. "I'm sorry," he said, aghast at what he had done. "Please forgive me."

She turned her back on him without a word and knelt down beside the crude casket in which the dead man lay. Bending her head, she said, "O almighty and vengeful Father, exact what payment Thou must for the apostasy Thou hast witnessed this night, but grant us on the morrow a clement day in order that this, thy wandering pilgrim, who has journeyed home at last, may know the reassuring radiance of Thy sun before his ascent into the maelstrom of Hell. Grant also that he may find the strength to survive the straits of Purgatory, and that he may emerge at last, purified and ennobled, before thy shining gates. Amen."

Christopher Stark tiptoed from the room.

APPARENTLY Priscilla's prayers were answered, for

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the next day dawned bright and clear—as bright and clear, at any rate, as it was possible for a day to dawn on Europa. The funeral took place in the morning, and in order that the whole village might attend, the omazone processing factory was shut down and work was suspended in the outlying fields, where the lichen-like plant was cultivated. Christopher Stark sat through the grim ceremony in the church and afterward followed the Miltonians to the cemetery. The dour expressions on the faces of adult and child alike matched the lugubrious intonations of the Bunyanesque pastor, but not a single tear was shed when at last the crude casket was lowered into the freshly-dug grave. Indeed, when each of the three Petrovnas cast a handful of snow and ice into the gaping hole, Chris got the impression that whatever sorrow they and the others might be experiencing stemmed not from the burial ceremony itself but from the fact that it was over.

That afternoon Priscilla's father returned to the omazone fields, and she and her mother went back to work in the processing factory. Left alone in the hut, Chris paced the floor in the naked radiance of the unshaded electric-light bulb that hung from the ceiling. He could remain no longer. His catamaran, refueled and re-provisioned, stood waiting for him in its berth, its hold as ravenous for fishes as his billfold was ravenous for the blue-backs that the fishes would bring in. *His* catamaran? No, not really his. Thanks to his prodigality in the New Babylon fun-houses, the back payments that he owed on it were as numerous as the fun-girls he had squandered them on. No, he could not remain —and yet he could not go either. Priscilla Petrovna was a sickness in him now, a sickness that only his having her could cure. The mute which her strait-laced religion had forced her to put upon the trumpet of her sex merely served to make the trumpet blare all the more loudly in his ears.

Would she come with him? he wondered. The unspoken question was so absurd that he almost laughed aloud. No, she would not come with him—not voluntarily, anyway.

He came to a stop in the middle of the floor. The naked light from the bulb above his head elicited every sordid detail of the room: the primitive stone hearth with its incongruous electric fire, the anachronistic iron kettle hanging incongruously over the glowing coils; the severe straight-backed chairs, the mean and narrow windows, the jerry-built ladder leading up into the drafty loft. Would it be a crime to take a woman away from such

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surroundings? Wouldn't it really be an act of mercy? His catamaran was a three-man job, and the supplies he had taken on would sustain two people for a good six months. Surely in that length of time he ought to be able to win Priscilla's love, and even if he failed and she still hated him enough to press a kidnapping charge against him, it would be her word against his—provided, of course, he brought the abduction off in such a way that there would be no witnesses, or that if there were, their testimony would be worthless.

Suddenly he remembered the little hypno-camera he had bought on impulse during his last sojourn in New Babylon. It was an out-and-out gadget devised for no other purpose than the laughs that could be obtained by hypnotizing someone while you snapped his picture; but sometimes a gadget could be a godsend. He got it out of his kit and read the instructions on the back. Then, fingers trembling, he set the hypno-dial for the maximum time-period. Priscilla's department in the omazone factory started work an hour sooner and let out an hour earlier than her mother's, and as for her father, he frequently worked till midnight in the fields. Unless Priscilla refused to have her picture taken, therefore, nothing stood between her and her abduction except the hours that had to elapse before she arrived home.

Chris was half afraid that she would refuse. She did not, however, but posed for him without demur. After that, it was merely a matter of telling her to pack her things, driving her to the spaceport in the snow-tractor, and making sure that the N.E.S.N. man on duty saw her boarding the catamaran seemingly of her own accord. He blasted off just as Hell was rising into the heavens.

THE gravity-control center made the proper self-adjustments, and the robot-brain established the catamaran in a suitable orbit around Europa which would be maintained until such time as standard operating procedure should be superseded by specific destination data. Christopher Stark wasted no time in preparing that data, and in feeding it into the time-space nexus-compensator—a mandatory device that eliminated the temporal discrepancies encountered during transphotic velocities. Then, as the catamaran broke orbit and began accelerating, he left the control room and headed for the little cabin where he had left Priscilla.

The hypno-period had worn off some time ago, and he found her lying on the narrow bunk, staring expressionlessly at the ceil-

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ing. He paused just inside the door. "I'm sorry I had to trick you," he said. "I'll treat you well, I promise."

She made no answer. She did not even turn her head.

"Look," he said, "you're only making things difficult for both of us. You're here, and there's nothing you can do about it. We're going fishing together, you and I are," he went on warmly. "I've extra gear and togs, and you can help me man my nets, and I'll split the profits with you fifty-fifty. All right?"

The catamaran gave a slight shudder as it hit C-plus velocity, and the cabin door creaked. There was no other sound in the room.

"Look at me!" Christopher Stark said. "I'm not a monster. I'll marry you, if you like. I'll marry you the minute we get back with our catch—I swear I will!"

She rolled over on her side and faced the port bulkhead. She spoke no word. Anger claimed him then, and stepping across the room, he seized her by the shoulder and turned her over. The cheap material of her dress ripped beneath his fingers. "What right have *you* got to set yourself above sex?" he demanded. "Do you know what the products you and your people produce is used for? Well I'll tell you what it's used for—it's used to rejuvenate old men! Omazone, testosterone, and black-water baths—add the three of them together and you get old rakes with young men's faces and young men's physiques on the prowl for girls young enough to be their granddaughters!"

HE felt the softness of her naked shoulder beneath his fingers then, and his eyes looked down upon the whiteness of her flesh. Weakness came into his legs, and he sank to his knees beside the bunk. He drew her to him and kissed her on the mouth. She did not resist, she did not even move; she merely lay there limply in his arms. When he released her, she fell back upon the bunk like a life-size rubber doll.

Sickened, he strode from the room. It was his first experience with passive resistance.

It was not his last. There was a Gandhi doll named Priscilla Petrovna on the ship, and when you raised its arms and let go, its arm dropped to its side, and when you kissed its lips, its lips were lifeless, and when you spoke to it, it did not answer; for Gandhi dolls are made of rubber, and rubber dolls can neither feel nor hear nor speak. Neither can they love.

Light years out from the orbital shores of Pluto, Christopher Stark cast his first net and dumped his first catch into the

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hold. In the months that followed, the hold filled inch by inch, and as the hoard of fishes grew, so too grew Christopher Stark's frustration. A Gandhi doll is not good for a man. Inarticulate, unfeeling, it lies passively in his arms, dead to his desire, indifferent to his want, unresponsive to his love. And no matter how much he may love it, without its love in return he cannot carry his own love beyond a kiss, and the time comes when he cannot carry it even that far. Yet still his love, thwarted and ignored, endures. He is a passionate Adonis burdened with a passive Venus who knows naught of the lists of love and regards the hot encounter as a sin against her strait-laced god. He is a doomed Adonis who will unconsciously seek his own destruction, not because he feels himself incapable of love, but because he is incapable of giving vent to the love he feels. Yet he will never let his Venus go.

Coming into Tethys with his six-months' catch, Christopher Stark opened his Venus' door and said, "I'm locking you in the living quarters while I go to market. The ship will be in drydock for hull-repairs and re-provisioning, but it won't do you any good to scream or pound on the hatch. The drydock personnel won't hear you, and even if they did, and let you out, you wouldn't be permitted to leave the port without a passport. Good by."

Silence.

The slamming of the cabin door.

TO get mid twenty-third century Tethys, take away the pensive nun, devout and pure, sober, steadfast, and demure. Take away loneliness and fear. Take away the slough of despond and the valley of the shadow of death. Bring back the Grape that can with Logic absolute the Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute, and banish the ghosts of John Milton and John Bunyan from the land. Now throw an even smaller acorn up into the sky and call it Sol, and usher in a Brobdingnagian gem of purest ray serene and call it Saturn. To get New Babylon, blow a trillion-dollar bubble in your macrocosmic pipe and set it down upon the land and cause green grass to grow beneath it and scatter crystalline structures all around. Add streets and laughter, fun-girls and gin; sprinkle liberally with prostitutes and pimps. Sully with a disreputable alley or two, and let the one-hundred dollar bills paid out by the fisheries that ring the port come drifting down like big blue snowflakes. To get the seven other Cities of the Plane, repeat the *modus operandi* seven times.

After marketing his catch,

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Christopher Stark headed for Fish Alley. Fish Alley was a long and sinuous snake of a street on which you could buy anything as long as it was in some respect immoral or illegal. You could buy lottery tickets, passports, birth certificates and aphrodisiac gas. You could buy mouthguns, fingernail-blades, stomp-heels, eye-gougers and coffee-flavored strychnine tablets. You could buy dirty pictures, dirty books, dirty comic films, dirty movies and dirty records, and if you wanted to badly enough you could even buy dirty dirt. Most important of all, you could buy *stong*.

Stong was Martian bootleg-wine, but its distinction did not end there. It relegated ordinary wine to the status of sarsaparilla. You didn't get drunk on it, you got crazy on it. You didn't get high on it, you went into orbit on it. It didn't take you out of yourself, it divorced you from yourself. It was the Id's best friend, and in Fish Alley, the Id never had it so good.

Christopher Stark went into the first *stong* bar he came to and ordered a drink and told the barmaid to leave the bottle on the bar. Christopher Stark wasn't worried about going crazy. He was crazy already. Rubber-doll crazy. Gandhi-doll crazy. Passive-resistance crazy. No, he didn't have to worry about *going* crazy.

THE first drink washed through him like sunlight after a long rain. The second flung wide the door to spring. The third turned the barmaid, who was fat and scrofulous, into Iphigenia. The fourth turned the barroom, which would have made an appropriate setting for Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, into the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. The fifth turned a pick-me-up girl who was sitting at a nearby table into Diana.

He took the bottle and went over and sat down beside her. "Did you ever hear of a Gandhi Doll?" he asked. "Listen, and I'll tell you about one."

"I know a better place we can talk," Diana said.

"About this Gandhi girl," Chris persisted. "There was this old man drifting in space, see, this old man I caught in my net when I was casting for a school of fishes." Abruptly he struck his fist on the table. Hot tears rolled down his cheeks. "That damned old man," he said. "That damned dirty old man! If it hadn't been for him, I never would have met her."

"Sure, fisher-boy, I understand. Come on, we'll go to my place, and you can tell me all about it."

The Temple of Diana turned around three times, and Diana doubled. Chris reached out and found one of her four hands. "All

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right," he said. "Let's get going."

The sordid little room in which he awoke some twelve hours later was reminiscent of Raskolnikov's fictitious garret in ancient St. Petersburg. His head was a raw wound, and Diana was gone. So was his billfold. When he sat up, a fat Tethys cockroach ran down the bedpost, rattled across the filthy floor and disappeared into a hole in the wall.

He went looking for Diana. Thanks to his habit of keeping a few bluebacks in a different pocket from the one in which he carried his billfold, he wasn't quite broke, and by the time he found her he had cancelled out some of the effects of his hangover by means of a well-known traditional therapy. She was sitting in a crowded *stong* bar with her pimp. Only she wasn't Diana any more—she was an old whore with a face like a Roman ruin.

Furious with himself for having picked her up, he strode across the room, seized her purse and dumped its contents on the table. His billfold was not numbered among them. She was so stoned that she didn't even recognize him, and she began to scream. Probably she would have screamed anyway. He grabbed her youthful pomaded pimp and went through his pockets. His fingers came upon a roll of bluebacks, and he confiscated it. The pimp seized his arm. "Thief!" the pimp shouted. "Pickpurse!" He faced the crowd of malcontents, miscreants and misfits that was gathering around the table. "You saw him brice me—are you going to let him get away with it?"

Chris tried to free his arm. The pimp hung on for dear life. The cordon tightened around the table. Chris swung then, connected; in sudden fury, he swung thrice more, then leaped over the prostrate body on the floor and squirmed and twisted his way out into the street. Someone had called the police, and a patrol 'copter was descending. Instinctively he began to run.

REALIZING that he was only attracting attention to himself, he slowed to a brisk walk. If it hadn't been for Priscilla's presence on board his catamaran, he would have returned to the bar and taken a chance on his story. With Priscilla on his hands, however, he did not dare. Keeping her imprisoned for longer than a few days was unthinkable, and if the police did not believe him, and detained him for any length of time, he would have to tell them about her. She could then press a kidnapping charge against him with a vengeance, and if his keeping her under lock and key failed to substantiate it, the hypno-camera with its undeveloped roll of imperishable film, which he had foolishly neglected to jet-

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tison, would. No, he could not go back, even though by running away he would lose his right, in the eyes of Tethys law, to be presumed innocent until proven guilty—a handicap that, judging from what he had heard about Tethys courts, would virtually assure his conviction.

After passing through the city locks, he stopped in the drydock office to pay his bill. The visiphone buzzed while the clerk was handing him his receipt. "Yes?" the clerk said, turning on the receiver.

The fact that appeared on the screen bespoke authority. So did the voice that crackled on the receiver-mike: "Lieutenant Berrand, New Babylon Police, speaking. We have an alert on a fisherman named Christopher Stark. Do you by any chance have his ship in drydock?"

So they knew his name then! His erstwhile Diana must have taken note of his identification papers before destroying them, and as a result had been able to identify him for the police—though she had undoubtedly done so by proxy. He was out of the office in less than a second, and running toward his ship. "Stop him, someone!" the clerk shouted. "Stop him!"

No one did. The catamaran had been eased out of drydock into an empty berth, and stood ready to go. After closing the outer and inner locks behind him, he glanced at the batten-board to see if the cargo locks were secured, then he turned on the control-room radio and tuned it in to the New Babylon police-band. The charge against him proved to be assault-and-robbery—a charge upon which a newly-enacted interplanetary law imposed a five-year statute of limitations. Perhaps it might turn out to be a godsend in disguise. For years he had needed a force above and beyond his own will power to keep him away from Tethys, and now fate had provided him with one. Tethys had recently seceded from the Terran Empire and at the moment was so unpopular with Earth and New Earth authorities that it received no co-operation whatsoever in the matter of extradition. Hereafter he would market his catches on New Earth then, and salt away his profits in a reliable bank. New Earth had its cesspools too, and one of the worst of them was the major fishery center, but compared to New Babylon, Nantucket II was a child's garden of verses, and presented very little in the way of temptation to a sophisticated fisherman such as himself. He would frequent its seamy side long enough to procure the new credentials he needed, but that was all.

He was starborne in a matter of minutes, his bridges flaming

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brightly in the wake of the jets. After the catamaran hit C-plus, he went into the living quarters to see if his Gandhi doll was all right. He looked in the lounge first, but she wasn't there. Next he looked in the galley. She wasn't there either. He saved her cabin till last. Probably she was lying on her bunk, sulking. She wasn't, though. Her bunk was empty. So was her cabin.

So, suddenly, was Christopher Stark.

HOURS later, the rattling of the hatch cover in the galley aroused him from the stupor into which he had sunk. Investigating, he found that the lock had been broken, and presently he located the discarded crowbar with which the job had been done. Stepping into his cabin, he discovered that the desk drawer in which he kept his petty cash had been forced open and that his petty cash was gone. So he knew, at least, how his Gandhi doll had effected her escape, and how she had obtained the wherewithal with which to bribe her way into New Babylon. What he didn't know was how he was going to endure five long years without her. The drunkard may be aware that he is better off without the drink he craves, but the knowledge will not in any way alleviate his craving.

What does the drunkard do, though, when the drink is removed from the bar and the barroom is shut down for five long years? Answer: if he is wise, he exploits the situation for all it is worth and tries to cure himself.

Thus, in a similar manner, did Christopher Stark try to cure himself of Priscilla Petrovna. He searched first of all for a substitute, and found it partly in the perfecting of his trade and partly in the writing of the book that had been seething in him for years. He no longer fished at random, but pored over map after map of the Trans-solar Sea till he knew the co-ordinates of every fishing bed by heart and could calculate the probable trajectories of the schools for years to come. During the periodic intervals when he put in to Nantucket II to market his catches and to take on fuel and supplies, he patronized, not bars, but banks and libraries, depositing his profits in the former and assimilating all the information he could find on star-fishing in the latter.

HE wrote the book four times before he gained sufficient mastery of the English language to enable him to say what he wanted to say in the way that what he wanted to say should be said. Then, his apprenticeship behind him, he threw away his first four attempts and embarked upon the fifth. At last the words

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commenced to flow; at last the scenes began to take on depth and color; at last the action broke free from the morass of hackneyed phrases through which it had been laboring and took on wings. He wrote about himself, or thought he did. Actually, his self-image was his hero. But that was all right. Few novelists have the honesty of Stendhal, and even Stendhal was oftentimes remiss when it came to setting himself down on paper. Christopher Stark's protagonist was a star fisherman named Simon Peters. He was tall and broad-shouldered and well-proportioned. He was brilliant, and he was beautiful. He was a demigod, in fact, and in common with most demigods he had an Achilles' heel, and his Achilles' heel was women. He was as much a fisher of females as he was of fishes, and his catches in both categories were legion. In the background loomed the constellation of the Brobdingnagian star fisherman that Chris had glimpsed—ages ago, it seemed now—and overshadowing the action was deep space itself. The title emerged of its own accord: *The Fishes of the Sea.*

When he put in to Nantucket II toward the end of the fourth year, he dispatched the manuscript to a New Boston publishing house and laid over awaiting a reply. He waited for six weeks, a period of time that freed him at last from the assault-and-robbery charge and opened up the gates of New Babylon to him once again. When at last the reply arrived, he was impatient to be gone, more ravenous than ever for his Gandhi doll. The cure had only made more hungry the appetite it had tried to sublimate, and his sickness was now a disease.

But while the cure had failed in one sense, it rewarded him richly in another. The publishing house agreed to publish his book, and when he finally set out for Tethys, his Nantucket II bank-account, sizeable to begin with, was even larger, thanks to the advance in royalties he had received. He was thirty-four by then, and the autumn of his youth was past; but winter still remained, and winter, it was said, was the sweetest season of the lot. He would see.

BEFORE looking for Priscilla, he went to the New Babylon Police Station and turned himself in. Less than an hour later, he was turned back out again with an irate admonition to watch his step and an equally irate warning to the effect that next time Big Brother would be watching, and would clobber him but good. He laughed, and headed for Fish Alley. The date was the first of April, 2253.

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This time he did not stop in the first *stong* bar he came to, nor the second, nor the third. Instead he began a systematic tour of the various backroom-agencies that specialized in forged passports. The information he wanted was not easy to come by, but bluebacks have persuasive tongues, and in the sixth backroom he visited, a bent old man dredged up a five-year-old memory of the customer Chris painstakingly described. Yes, she had been there, the old man said. The reason he remembered her was because of her strange clothing. The name she had used? The old man remembered that too, because of its odd flavor. Petrovna, that was it. Priscilla Petrovna. No, she hadn't said anything about leaving New Babylon; to the contrary, the old man had received the impression that she intended to settle down there.

Chris grimaced. He could have saved himself half a hundred bluebacks simply by looking up her name in the New Babylon visiphone directory. He proceeded to do so after leaving Fish Alley. There was only one Petrovna listed—a Miss Priscilla Petrovna. He expelled a breath of relief. She had not married then.

Should he call her? he wondered.

He decided not to. Gandhi dolls, for all their listlessness in other matters, were perfectly capable of turning off visiphones. They were capable of closing doors too, but not if you got your foot in first. The address listed in the directory was *209-9 Star Lane*. He could be there in a matter of minutes if he took an antigrav cab.

He did so. Star Lane was devoted exclusively to modest apartment structures. Ascending the ramp of no. 206, he discovered that he was trembling. He was suddenly furious with himself. Did this little Neopuritan who despised the ground he walked on simply because he had committed a sacrilege in the eyes of her vengeful god mean so much to him that he was going to go on fawning at her feet forever? Self-hatred shook him. He would turn around this very minute and get back to his ship as fast as his legs would carry him and blast off for the Transsolar Sea! He went right on ascending the ramp.

AT the ninth level, he turned into a narrow corridor and walked down it till he came to a door with her name on it. Still trembling, still despising himself, he pressed his forefinger against the visitor-button. He was almost relieved when the door said, "Miss Petrovna is not at home." "Did she say where she was going?" he asked.

"Yes," said the door. "To her

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place of employment—six-one-oh Fun Street.

He was dumbfounded. Priscilla working in a *fun*-house? Priscilla a *fun*-girl? His little Neopuritan Gandhi doll entertaining *men* for a living? He simply couldn't believe it. He didn't believe it, either, till he stepped through the entrance of no. 610 Fun Street and saw her dancing on one of the tables.

It wasn't a particularly risqué dance. Nevertheless he was shocked. He was shocked for the simple reason that it was Priscilla who was performing it. He would have been shocked even if she had been standing still. Her being on the table would have been enough in itself to shock him. Her tight, thigh-length dress would have been enough for that matter, not to mention the ring in her nose and her bobbed hair. She didn't have to *dance*.

He stood just within the entrance, incapable for the moment of proceeding another step. Saturn had risen, and showed like a great and shining jewel through the transparent roof. Its argent luminescence, pouring prodigally down into the room, bathed objects and persons alike in a radiance that paralleled the brightness, but not the harshness, of Old Earth sunlight. Watching the subtle interplay of silvery light and slightly darker silvery shadow, he thought he understood why Priscilla had changed.

She had changed because Hell no longer hovered over her head. She had changed because she no longer needed to identify sex with sin. She had changed because she no longer had to walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

He willed himself to step farther into the room, deeper into the jewel-light. She saw him then, and stopped in the middle of her dance. The *avant garde* combo that had been accompanying her movements ceased operations also, and a thunderclap of silence shattered the cacophony. Priscilla put the silence to rout. "Chris!" she cried, leaping down from the table and running across the floor to meet him. "Chris!"

AGAIN he found himself in a state of disbelief. He came out of it with her kisses on his lips. "Chris," she said again, "Chris, Chris! I've counted the days and the months and the hours. I knew—I hoped, I prayed —that you'd come back!"

They walked hand in hand through the silvery Saturnian rain to her apartment structure. They climbed the ramp side by side, arms swinging, fingers intertwined. He dwelled deep in a dream now, a dream compounded of wonderment and delight. Was this the same Priscilla Petrovna

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who had sat silently beside him in the heatless little shed on Europa? Was this the languid Gandhi doll who had driven him half of of his mind in the wastes of the Trans-solar Sea? Where were the golden fires of hatred that had once burned so brightly in her eyes? Surely they had not gone out completely.

In her living room, she said, "I've missed you, Chris." In her bedroom, she said, "These are the others."

It was difficult, swimming to the surface of the fathom-deep dream. "The others?" he said, like a golem made of wood. "What others?"

She pointed to a row of snap-

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Illustrator SUMMERS

THE STAR FISHERMAN

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shots on the wall above her bed. "You know what others," she said.

He leaned across the bed, gripping the headboard to support himself. The snapshots were of men. He did not look at them closely—he knew he would be sick if he did—but he counted them. *Nine,* he counted. *Nine.*

He straightened. For a moment he thought that he was going to faint. Priscilla was regarding him triumphantly, and the golden fires were burning once again in her eyes. *My God, how she must hate me!* he thought. He had known, of course, that there had been other men—her pierced nose had told him that. But to have her flaunt them in his face! To have her use them as a whip with which to flail him! He had not dreamed such hatred could exist.

He staggered from the room. She hurried after him, caught up to him as he was opening the corridor door. "Now that you know, what are you going to do about it, Christopher Stark?" she said.

Fury shook him then, and his hands leaped up and gripped her throat. "I'm going to kill you," he heard his hoarse voice say. "I'm going to choke out every last bit of rotten life that's in you!"

She did not move, showed not the slightest sign of fear. She knew as well as he did that his words were empty; that however much she had hurt him, she had not destroyed his love. A man cannot murder a woman because she hates him. He must hate her too—and Christopher Stark found himself wanting in the balance.

HIS hands fell away, and he ran from the room. He ran along the corridor and down the ramp to the street. In the street, he almost collided with a woman who was turning in toward the apartment-structure entrance. He slowed to a walk then. He walked and walked. The silvery rain of sinking Saturn faded out and disappeared. The streetlights came on. He continued to walk. After a while his footsteps took on direction, and at length he found himself passing through the New Babylon locks and out into the spaceport. Immediately his limbs grew heavy, and out of force of habit he slipped an oxygen tablet into his mouth. He saw the two New Babylon police officers then, out of the corner of his eye. They had just emerged from the locks and were hurrying toward him. He paused and stood there waiting for them to come up, idly wondering what they wanted, but not caring very much. One of them he noted absently, had a hypnogun in his hand. Now he was pointing it; now there was a kaleidoscope whirling before Chris-

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topher Stark's eyes. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Priscilla Petrovna," said the officer with the gun. "Yes sir," said Christopher Stark mechanically, and accompanied the two officers back to the city.

* * *

Name of victim: Priscilla Petrovna

Time and date of death: 5:23-5:34 P.M. 1st April, 2253, N.E.S. time

Scene of death: no. 206-9 Star Lane, New Babylon, Tethys

Cause of death: strangulation

Murder weapon: a pair of hands

Witnesses: (1) apartment no. 9 responsi-portal; (2) Sarah Bennett

Remarks: The accused insisted, despite the presence of his fingerprints both upon the deceased's throat and in her bedroom, and despite the testimony of the responsi-portal, the memory banks of which recorded his very words ("I'm going to kill you. I'm going to choke out every last bit of rotten life that's in you."), and the testimony of Sarah Bennett, who saw him running out of the apartment structure at approximately 5:25 P.M. on the afternoon of the murder, that he was deeply in love with the deceased and would have been incapable of strangling her. The accused's past record, however, suggested strongly that he was prone to violence, and the consuming love which he admitted feeling toward the deceased when weighed against the snapshots which he admitted seeing in her bedroom left so little doubt as to his guilt that the court refused to permit an investigation of the subjects of the snapshots on the grounds that such a procedure would impugn their reputations without serving any purpose.

Name of the accused: Christopher Stark

Occupation: star fisherman

THEY sentenced him to forty years in the penal colony on Deimos. Compared to Deimos, the island of Alcatraz is a pleasant Pacific atoll. Deimos is a true rock. According to Martian folklore, it is one of the two mountains which the giant Felikannibub tore up by their roots in a fit of anger and threw at the sun. It is unfortunate that he did not throw it hard enough for it to attain an escape velocity beyond that required for an orbit, for the Martian sky would be much better off without it. It is ugly and misshapen, and about as inspirational to look at as an old shoe.

The penal colony which the good folk of Tethys built for the chastisement of their major criminals has long since degenerated into a ruin. It had something of the aspect of a ruin in

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Christopher Stark's day. The prison proper was built of huge stone blocks, and encircled a bleak area euphemistically called an exercise enclosure. The pursuits of the prisoners were twofold: walking in the enclosure and sleeping in their cells. In addition, there was a third, optional, pursuit: thinking. And therein lay the rack, the screw, the whipping post; therein lay the price that the prisoner paid for his crime against his fellow man. Therein lay insanity.

Unless, like Christopher Stark, he could give his thinking direction. Unless, like Christopher Stark, he had a murder to erase. Unless, like Christopher Stark, he was determined to see his true love once again.

After serving his sentence, Christopher Stark would be seventy-four years old. He would, if he were lucky, have ten more years to go. How best to spend those years? How best to bet their days and weeks and months so that when at last Death took his hand it would not find him with an empty purse? Night after lonely night, Christopher Stark lay awake in his bunk, staring up through his cell-window at the orange expanse of Mars, pondering the question. And all the while he knew the answer. For if there had been two Priscillas, there had to be a third. The Neo-puritan Priscilla represented one apogee of the arc of the pendulum, and the fun-girl Priscilla, the other. In between the two apogees there had to be a Priscilla who combined the two extremes, who was half Neo-puritan and half fun-girl; who was the sort of woman, in short, whom the average man falls in love with and marries. This was the Priscilla he would pursue next, and in the process change the past and erase her murder.

A LARGE order, to be sure; but *The Fishes of the Sea* had become a phenomenal best-seller, and Christopher Stark was rich. Not as rich as Croesus, perhaps, but rich enough, nevertheless, to buy quite a number of things. And so he lay on his bunk, night after night, and looked up through his cell window into yesterday. And Deimos spun upon its orbit in the vast and complex Grandfather's clock of space, and Mars turned and the Earth turned, and the solar system crept imperceptibly along upon its journey within a journey, and the Milky Way Galaxy pinwheeled lazily as it traveled with its sisters NGC 147, NGC 185, NGC 205, NGC 221, NGC 278, NGC 404, NGC 598, and M—31 toward a destination man would never know, and eventually one trillionth of a cosmic second passed, and forty years went down the drain of time.

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THE sign on the frosted door said, HICKMAN REJUVENATION CENTER, *New Earth Branch*. The old man who had just stepped off the elevator opened the door and went in. "I have an appointment with Dr. Hickman," he told the girl behind the outer-office desk. "My name is Christopher Stark."

The girl gave him a glance that was both knowing and contemptuous, then nodded in the direction of the inner-office door. "You may go in now," she said.

Dr. Hickman was a wiry little man with bright brown eyes and wispy brown hair. He stood up when Chris entered, and shook hands. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Stark?"

Chris did so. "First of all," he said, "I want to know how many years I'll lose."

Dr. Hickman leaned forward. "But first of all, Mr. Stark, I must know how old—or rather, how young—you want to be."

"Twenty-five," Chris said.

"H'm'm."

"I'll want a different face too something a little more pleasing to the eye than the one I've got, and varied enough so that I won't be recognized. Also, I'll want broader shoulders, and about two more inches of height. Can you take care of all that too?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Hickman said. "It's part of our regular service. How old are you now?"

"Seventy-four," Stark answered.

"I see."

Dr. Hickman got a glossy booklet out of his desk, riffled through it to the page he wanted and ran a forefinger down two parallel columns of figures. Presently his bright brown eyes flicked upward. "Assuming you're in reasonably good health, ten years will get you two, Mr. Stark."

Chris nodded. He had hoped for three, but beggars can't be choosers, even when they're rich. "How long will it take?"

"Three months—possibly four." Dr. Hickman cleared his throat. "I feel ethically compelled to point out, however," he went on in a more serious tone of voice, "that we do not advise five-to-one speedups. There is always the danger, toward the end, of an acceleration of cellular breakdown, accompanied by rapid synaptic deterioration and—"

Chris interrupted him. "I'll take my chances—just give me the two years. Now, how soon can I begin?"

Dr. Hickman sighed. "Right away, if you like."

"Good," Christopher Stark said. "I'm sick of being an old man."

THE sign on the battered door said, V. WESTON, ELECTRONICS EXPERT. *Specialist in ganglion-circuit repairwork.* The tall

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broad-shouldered young man with the old-looking eyes who had just alighted from the Nantucket II anti-grav cab opened the door and went in. A middle-aged man with thinning hair and a tired face stood behind a tool-cluttered table that functioned as both counter and workbench. "V. Weston?" the visitor asked.

The middle-aged man nodded. "Yes sir."

"I'm Simon Peters," the tall man said. Then, "What do you know about time-space nexus-compensators?

Weston's voice was eager. "Why, I know everything there is to know about them. I can take them apart and put them back together blindfolded. I can—"

"Good," Simon Peters said. "I have one I want you to take apart. It's on a small ketch I just bought. Only when you put it back together, I want you to alter its mechanism in such a way that I can set it for any point in space-time I choose, whereupon it will plot a course containing the necessary spatial distance and synchronize that distance with the requisite transphotic velocity and bring the ship to the chosen point in a matter of hours. Can you do it?"

V. Weston had paled. "Yes, I can do it, Mr. Peters. That's not the point. Surely you must be familiar with the nexus-statute of the interplanetary code."

"I certainly am," said Simon Peters. "So familiar with it, in fact, that I can recite it word for word. 'Any person convicted of willfully tampering with a time-space nexus-compensator shall be liable to not more than twenty-five years in prison and not less than ten, and any person convicted of deliberately altering a time-space nexus-compensator for the purpose of retro-travel shall be liable to the death penalty'. They'll tell you, Mr. Weston, that the past belongs to the people who lived in it, and that we of today are ethically bound to stay out of it; but what they won't tell you is that they're afraid of someone going back to a previous era and amassing a fortune through his foreknowledge, thereby instituting a financial chain of events that could conceivably make the poor of today rich, and the rich of today poor. So you see, Mr. Weston, retro-travel isn't ethically wrong—it's merely financially hazardous to the powers-that-be."

Weston's accelerated blink-rate indicated that the point had gotten home. However, he was not won over yet. "The penalty is still death, Mr. Peters," he said.

"Look," Simon Peters said. "I don't know whether I can change the past. I think—I hope—I can, in a very small way. But even if I

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do, and future events *are* altered, no one can possibly be aware of the fact. So if you're apprehended, Mr. Weston, it won't be because of anything I do—or have done—in the past. Ships disappear every year, and for all we know, they and their owners make the journey into yesterday; but I have never heard of anyone being convicted, or even accused, of gimmicking a time-space nexus-compensator. So all you've really got to worry about is how much I'll pay you for the job, and you don't really have to worry about that, because I'll pay you any price you ask. What do you say, Mr. Weston?"

Some of the tiredness departed from Weston's face, and he stood up a little straighter. "I'm sick of being poor," he said.

"Good," said Simon Peters. "Come on, I'll take you to my ketch."

HE chose the date carefully. The rejuvenation center had guaranteed him two years, but he could afford to take no chances; hence he allowed two weeks leeway, and emerged in the Tethys stratosphere on the fifteenth day of April, 2251, one year, eleven months and two weeks before the day Christopher Stark would walk out of Priscilla Petrovna's apartment to be—or not to be accused of her murder.

After berthing his ship, he entered New Babylon. He tried Fun Street first, gambling that his true love had already embarked upon her career. The gamble paid off: he found her in the same house Christopher Stark would find her one year, eleven months and two weeks hence.

She was sitting at a corner table, all alone. Her tawny hair, as yet unbobbed, rippled to her shoulders. Her cheeks were fuller than they had been in Miltonia, and the sternness of her mouth and chin was less severe. He went over and sat down beside her. "You're new here, aren't you?" he said.

She gave a start when she first looked at him, and for a moment he thought she had recognized him. Apparently, however, she had not, for she merely said, "Not really new. I've been here almost a month. After working for three years in a dress shop to raise my bond, it seems like heaven."

"Oh, then you're not so new at that. My name is Simon Peters."

"Priscilla—Priscilla Petrovna."

"Will you dance with me?"

She nodded brightly, and stood up. The *avant garde* combo was not in evidence, and subdued music was emanating from hidden speakers. The edge of Saturn's outer ring was just beginning to show through the transparent roof. Seeing her again had nearly

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torn him apart. Dancing with her did. He held her tightly against him so that she would not notice the tears running down his cheeks, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he covertly wiped his eyes. The floor was nearly deserted, and no one witnessed his distress.

HE remained with her till her tour of duty was up, then he walked through the New Babylon streets with her to the apartment structure where she lived. It was the same one in which she would be living when Christopher Stark appeared upon the scene. Was the wall above her bed as yet unsullied with the snapshots that would one day hang there, Simon Peters wondered, or had the deplorable display already been begun? Her nose was as yet unpierced—true; but the wearing of nose-rings was a custom, not a law, and an unpierced nose was not an infallible sign of virginity. The little-girl kiss she bestowed upon his cheek when they said good night reassured him, and he hummed softly to himself as he walked the streets in search of a suitable place to live.

He began seeing her every day. She did not seem to mind. He bought her stoles and gowns and underthings, and fishes for her hair. But the love he sought did not materialize in her eyes, and while her kisses were remote from the Gandhi-doll kisses he had known on the Trans-solar Sea, they were remote too from the kisses which a woman bestows upon the lips of the man she loves. Small wonder, then, that he should have been surprised when, several months after he first began courting her, she asked him if she could be his mistress.

They were dancing at the time. "You know the answer without asking," he said, when at last his astonishment abated. "You knew it when I first came over and sat beside you."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose I did. It's funny, isn't it, how two people can just look into one another's eyes and tell."

"Yes," he said, looking into her eyes and not finding the love that should have been there. "Why don't you ask me to marry you while you're at it?" he asked. "I might say yes."

She was startled. "Marry you? Oh, I couldn't do that. You see—"

"Yes?" he said.

"Nothing. It's just that I don't want to get married—not just yet, anyway. Shall we go now?"

"I'll get your coat," he said above the pounding of his heart.

THE next day he went with her while she had her nose pierced, and afterward he bought her the most expensive nose-

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ring he could find. His heart sang while he suprvised the selection of a fish-pendant that would do justice to the brightness of her eyes. He had been her first lover after all, he, Simon Peters had. He, Simon Peters, nee Christopher Stark.

Some of his euphoria departed when she bought a small camera and insisted on snapping his picture. Was time mocking him? Was he merely initiating the series of lovers that he was trying to avert? Had his snapshot been one of the nine Christopher Stark had seen—would see—upon the wall above her bed? He looked for it that night, but did not find it. Nor the next night, nor the next. Some of his uneasiness departed then, and as the months passed and the wall remained empty, his fears gradually went away.

But not for long. Although she was his mistress, Priscilla would neither move in with him nor permit him to move in with her. Neither would she permit him to visit her every single night, maintaining that if she did, he might grow tired of her. Consequently, since he did not dare to show himself too often in public places for fear of being identified as Christopher Stark and apprehended for the assault-and-robbery charge, much of his time was relegated to brooding in the little out-of-the-way room he had rented. The inspiration for his brooding, however, arose, not from misgivings concerning his growing tired of Priscilla, but from misgivings concerning Priscilla's growing tired of him.

As time passed, he began to suspect her of having another lover. Not because of any direct evidence, but because of the flowering of young womanhood that was taking place within her. He was sure that he himself was not the cause of the expectant light that came with ever-growing frequency into her gold-green eyes, the smiles that danced with ever-increasing abandon on her lips, and the happiness that gave her face an ever-greater radiance; and if he was not the cause, then someone else was, and that someone had to be someone she loved.

Perhaps he had eliminated all of her lovers save one. Still and all, though, that one could very well be the one who had made—or who would make—the attempt on her life.

He would see—and soon, too. Much too soon.

IN settling for two years, he had had in mind two years in a young man's life. The rejuvenation center had given him a young-man's body, but it had not given him a young-man's mind. As a result, he had retained an old-man's perspective of time, and two years to a man

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of seventy-four is a giddy toboggan ride down an ever icier slope. In Simon Peter's case, the finish-line lay in the valley of the shadow of death.

As the landscape of the days and weeks and months flashed past, harbingers of that finish-line began to appear. His step lost its lightness, his breath grew short; his vision dimmed and his hearing began to fail. And yet no visible evidence of his imminent crossing manifested itself. He was still ostensibly young, still ostensibly healthy; no lines marred his handsome face, and his eyes seemed bright and clear.

But he was dying, and he knew it, and sometimes when he awoke during the night and could not fall back to sleep, he buried his head on Priscilla's breast and clung to her like a frightened child. And if she was not there, and the bed turned out to be his own, he buried his head in his pillow, and cried. And slowly, ineluctably, his time ran out.

ON the afternoon of the first of April, 2253, Simon Peters was standing in the shadows behind the *avant garde* combo when Christopher Stark came into the fun-house. Christopher Stark did not see him. Christopher Stark saw no one except the girl dancing on the table.

Simon Peters followed them when they left. After they entered no. 206 Star Lane, he took up a position just to the right of the entrance. He was taken aback when Christopher Stark came running out right on schedule. He had hoped that by eliminating the snapshots he had altered the scheme of things at least a little bit. He hurried into the building just as Christopher Stark nearly collided with Sarah Bennett. Neither of them saw him, and he met no one on the ramp. He was breathing hard when he reached the ninth level, and he had to stop to rest. Glancing at his watch, he saw that the time was 5:27 P.M. He would have to hurry: her would-be murderer might be in the apartment already. Gripping the hypno-gun which he had bought that morning and which he carried in his right-hand coat-pocket, he hurried down the corridor.

Her door was ajar. Without pausing, he pushed it all the way open and stepped inside. Priscilla was standing in the living room, an expression on her face that he had never seen there before. She started when he entered; then disappointment came into her eyes. "Oh, it's you," she said.

Ignoring her, he walked across the room and stepped into the kitchen. There was no one there. Next, he went into the bedroom. There was no one there either.

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Good, he thought. He would be there waiting when her murderer arrived.

He saw the snapshots then. On the wall above her bed. He advanced across the room, leaned across the familiar bedspread. He counted them. *Nine*, he counted. *Nine*. The first one was strikingly familiar. Peering closer, he saw that it was the snapshot she had taken of him.

She had followed him into the room. "Simon, what's come over you—" she began. And then, her gaze joining his, "Oh, you've seen them. I didn't mean for you to."

"Your lovers, no doubt," he said, confronting her.

"Not, not really—except for the first. For you. The others are men I let pick me up in the street and take me home. I never saw any of them afterward. You see, one would not have been enough." She reached out and touched his cheek in a gesture that came close to being tender. "Poor Simon," she said. "I did not mean to hurt you too."

He could feel the muscles of his face contracting, and there was a throbbing in his forehead. "Who did you mean to hurt?"

SHE sighed. "Listen, and I will try to explain. On Europa, where I used to live, a man came to us bearing a dead man he thought to be my grandfather. On Europa, the people are desperately unhappy, and when people are desperately unhappy they can find relief in only one way—by exploiting someone who is worse off than they are. Bringing a Europan girl a dead man is like bringing a New Earth girl a box of candy. She will not refuse it, even if it does not rightfully belong to her. Her parents would not let her, and neither would the people of her village. No, she will claim it—and if she is human, she will develop a tender spot in her heart for the man who brought it. In my case, I did not need to. I—I fell in love with him the minute I saw him—so much in love that I feared to speak lest I betrayed myself."

Simon Peters looked at the snapshots on the wall. His voice cracked when he said, "Go on."

"Oh yes," she said, "the snapshots. The—the other men." He looked at her then, and saw the golden fires burning brightly in her eyes, the golden fires that he had once thought to be fires of hatred but which he now knew to be fires of love. "He threw the women he had had in my face, this man did," Priscilla went on, "and now I have thrown the men I have had in his. Now the score is even. For five years I planned and waited for the moment he would return. Now he has run away again, this time to nurse

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GREENSLAVES

By FRANK HERBERT

From the jungle came a new sort of being . . . but only by coming face to face—face?—with it could man know whether it was friend or foe.

HE looked pretty much like the bastard offspring of a Gurrani Indio and some backwoods farmer's daughter, some *sertanista* who had tried to forget her enslavement to the *encomendero* system by "eating the iron"—which is what they call lovemaking through the grill of a consel gate.

The type-look was almost perfect except when he forgot himself while passing through one of the deeper jungle glades.

His skin tended to shade down to green then, fading him into the background of leaves and vines, giving a strange disembodiment to the mud-grey shirt and ragged trousers, the inevitable frayed straw hat and rawhide sandals soled with pieces cut from worn tires.

Such lapses became less and less frequent the farther he got from the Parana headwaters, the *sertao* hinterland of Goyaz where men with his bang-cut black hair and glittering dark eyes were common.

By the time he reached *bandeirantes* country, he had achieved almost perfect control over the chameleon effect.

But now he was out of the jungle growth and into the brown dirt tracks that separated the parceled farms of the resettlement plan. In his own way, he knew he was approaching the *bandeirante* checkpoints, and with an almost human gesture, he fingered the *cedula de gracias al sacar*, the certificate of white blood, tucked safely beneath his shirt. Now and again, when humans were not near, he practiced speaking aloud the name that had been chosen for him—"Antonio Raposo Tavares."

The sound was a bit stridulant, harsh on the edges, but he knew

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it would pass. It already had. Goyaz Indios were notorious for the strange inflection of their speech. The farm folk who had given him a roof and fed him the previous night had said as much.

When their questions had become pressing, he had squatted on the doorstep and played his flute, the *qena* of the Andes Indian that he carried in a leather purse hung from his shoulder. He had kept the sound to a conventional, non-dangerous pitch. The gesture of the flute was a symbol of the region. When a Guarani put flute to nose and began playing, that was a sign words were ended.

The farm folk had shrugged and retired.

Now, he could see red-brown rooftops ahead and the white crystal shimmering of a *bandeirante* tower with its aircars alighting and departing. The scene held an odd hive-look. He stopped, finding himself momentarily overcome by the touch of instincts that he knew he had to master or fail in the ordeal to come.

He united his mental identity then, thinking, *We are greenslaves subservient to the greater whole.* The thought lent him an air of servility that was like a shield against the stares of the humans trudging past all around him. His kind knew many mannerisms and had learned early that servility was a form of concealment.

Presently, he resumed his plodding course toward the town and the tower.

The dirt track gave way to a two-lane paved market road with its footpaths in the ditches on both sides. This, in turn, curved alongside a four-deck commercial transport highway where even the footpaths were paved. And now there were groundcars and aircars in greater number, and he noted that the flow of people on foot was increasing.

Thus far, he had attracted no dangerous attention. The occasional snickering side-glance from natives of the area could be safely ignored, he knew. Probing stares held peril, and he had detected none. The servility shielded him.

THE sun was well along toward mid-morning and the day's heat was beginning to press down on the earth, raising a moist hothouse stink from the dirt beside the pathway, mingling the perspiration odors of humanity around him.

And they were around him now, close and pressing, moving slower and slower as they approached the checkpoint bottleneck. Presently, the forward motion stopped. Progress resolved itself into shuffle and stop, shuffle and stop.

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This was the critical test now and there was no avoiding it. He waited with something like an Indian's stoic patience. His breathing had grown deeper to compensate for the heat, and he adjusted it to match that of the people around him, suffering the temperature rise for the sake of blending into his surroundings.

Andes Indians didn't breathe deeply here in the lowlands.

Shuffle and stop.

Shuffle and stop.

He could see the checkpoint now.

Fastidious bandeirantes in sealed white cloaks with plastic helmets, gloves and boots stood in a double row within a shaded brick corridor leading into the town. He could see sunlight hot on the street beyond the corridor and people hurrying away there after passing the gantlet.

The sight of that free area beyond the corridor sent an ache of longing through all the parts of him. The suppression warning flashed out instantly on the heels of that instinctive reaching emotion.

No distraction could be permitted now; he was into the hands of the first bandeirante, a hulking blonde fellow with pink skin and blue eyes.

"Step along now! Lively now!" the fellow said.

A gloved hand propelled him toward two bandeirantes standing on the right side of the line.

"Give this one an extra treatment," the blonde giant called. "He's from the upcountry by the look of him."

The other two bandeirantes had him now, one jamming a breather mask over his face, the other fitting a plastic bag over him. A tube trailed from the bag out to machinery somewhere in the street beyond the corridor.

"Double shot!" one of the bandeirantes called.

Fuming blue gas puffed out the bag around him, and he took a sharp, gasping breath through the mask.

Agony!

The gas drove through every multiple linkage of his being with needles of pain.

We must not weaken, he thought.

But it was a deadly pain, killing. The linkages were beginning to weaken.

"Okay on this one," the bag handler called.

The mask was pulled away. The bag was slipped off. Hands propelled him down the corridor toward the sunlight.

"Lively now! Don't hold up the line."

The stink of the poison gas was all around him. It was a new one —a dissembler. They hadn't prepared him for this poison!

Now, he was into the sunlight and turning down a street lined

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with fruit stalls, merchants bartering with customers or standing fat and watchful behind their displays.

In his extremity, the fruit beckoned to him with the promise of life-saving sanctuary for a few parts of him, but the integrating totality fought off the lure. He shuffled as fast as he dared, dodging past the customers, through the knots of idlers.

"You like to buy some fresh oranges?"

An oily dark hand thrust two oranges toward his face.

"Fresh oranges from the green country. Never been a bug anywhere near these."

He avoided the hand, although the odor of the oranges came near overpowering him.

Now, he was clear of the stalls, around a corner down a narrow side street. Another corner and he saw far away to his left, the lure of greenery in open country, the free area beyond the town.

He turned toward the green, increasing his speed, measuring out the time still available to him. There was still a chance. Poison clung to his clothing, but free air was filtering through the fabric —and the thought of victory was like an antidote.

We can make it yet!

THE green drew closer and closer—trees and ferns beside a river bank. He heard the running water. There was a bridge thronging with foot traffic from converging streets.

No help for it: he joined the throng, avoided contact as much as possible. The linkages of his legs and back were beginning to go, and he knew the wrong kind of blow could dislodge whole segments. He was over the bridge without disaster. A dirt track led off the path and down toward the river.

He turned toward it, stumbled against one of two men carrying a pig in a net slung between them. Part of the shell on his right upper leg gave way and he could feel it begin to slip down inside his pants.

The man he had hit took two backward steps, almost dropped the end of the burden.

"Careful!" the man shouted.

The man at the other end of the net said: "Damn' drunks."

The pig set up a squirming, squealing distraction.

In this moment, he slipped past them onto the dirt track leading down toward the river. He could see the water down there now, boiling with aeration from the barrier filters.

Behind him, one of the pig carriers said: "I don't think he was drunk, Carlos. His skin felt dry and hot. Maybe he was sick."

The track turned around an embankment of raw dirt dark brown with dampness and dipped

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toward a tunnel through ferns and bushes. The men with the pig could no longer see him, he knew, and he grabbed at his pants where the part of his leg was slipping, scurried into the green tunnel.

Now, he caught sight of his first mutated bee. It was dead, having entered the barrier vibration area here without any protection against that deadliness. The bee was one of the butterfly type with iridescent yellow and orange wings. It lay in the cup of a green leaf at the center of a shaft of sunlight.

He shuffled past, having recorded the bee's shape and color. They had considered the bees as a possible answer, but there were serious drawbacks to this course. A bee could not reason with humans, that was the key fact. And humans had to listen to reason soon, else all life would end.

There came the sound of someone hurrying down the path behind him, heavy footsteps thudding on the earth.

Pursuit?....

He was reduced to a slow shuffling now and soon it would be only crawling progress, he knew. Eyes searched the greenery around him for a place of concealment. A thin break in the fern wall on his left caught his attention. Tiny human footprints led into it—children. He forced his way through the ferns, found himself on a low narrow path along the embankment. Two toy aircars, red and blue, had been abandoned on the path. His staggering foot pressed them into the dirt.

The path led close to a wall of black dirt festooned with creepers, around a sharp turn and onto the lip of a shallow cave. More toys lay in the green gloom at the cave's mouth.

He knelt, crawled over the toys into the blessed dankness, lay there a moment, waiting.

The pounding footsteps hurried past a few feet below.

Voices reached up to him.

"He was headed toward the river. Think he was going to jump in?"

"Who knows? But I think me for sure he was sick."

"Here; down this way. Somebody's been down this way."

The voices grew indistinct, blended with the bubbling sound of the river.

THE men were going on down the path. They had missed his hiding place. But why had they pursued him? He had not seriously injured the one by stumbling against him. Surely, they did not suspect.

Slowly, he steeled himself for what had to be done, brought his specialized parts into play and began burrowing into the earth at the end of the cave. Deeper and

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deeper he burrowed, thrusting the excess dirt behind and out to make it appear the cave had collapsed.

Ten meters in he went before stopping. His store of energy contained just enough reserve for the next stage. He turned on his back, scattering the dead parts of his legs and back, exposing the queen and her guard cluster to the dirt beneath his chitinous spine. Orifices opened at his thighs, exuded the cocoon foam, the soothing green cover that would harden into a protective shell.

This was victory; the essential parts had survived.

Time was the thing now—ten and one half days to gather new energy, go through the metamorphosis and disperse. Soon, there would be thousands of him—each with its carefully mimicked clothing and identification papers and appearance of humanity.

Identical—each of them.

There would be other checkpoints, but not as severe; other barriers, lesser ones.

This human copy had proved a good one. They had learned many things from study of their scattered captives and from the odd crew directed by the red-haired human female they'd trapped in the *sertao*. How strange she was: like a queen and not like a queen. It was so difficult to understand human creatures, even when you permitted them limited freedom . . . almost impossible to reason with them. Their slavery to the planet would have to be proved dramatically, perhaps.

The queen stirred near the cool dirt. They had learned new things this time about escaping notice. All of the subsequent colony clusters would share that knowledge. One of them—at least—would get through to the city by the Amazon "River Sea" where the death-for-all originated. One had to get through.

SENHOR Gabriel Martinho, prefect of the Mato Grosso Barrier Compact, paced his study, muttering to himself as he passed the tall, narrow window that admitted the evening sunlight. Occasionally, he paused to glare down at his son, Joao, who sat on a tapir-leather sofa beneath one of the tall bookcases that lined the room.

The elder Martinho was a dark wisp of a man, limb thin, with grey hair and cavernous brown eyes above an eagle nose, slit mouth and boot-toe chin. He wore old style black clothing as befitted his position, his linen white against the black, and with golden cuffstuds glittering as he waved his arms.

"I am an object of ridicule!" he snarled.

Joao, a younger copy of the fa-

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ther, his hair still black and wavy, absorbed the statement in silence. He wore a bandeirante's white coverall suit sealed into plastic boots at the calf.

"An object of ridicule!" the elder Martinho repeated.

It began to grow dark in the room, the quick tropic darkness hurried by thunderheads piled along the horizon. The waning daylight carried a hazed blue cast. Heat lightning spattered the patch of sky visible through the tall window, sent dazzling electric radiance into the study. Drumming thunder followed. As though that were the signal, the house sensors turned on lights wherever there were humans. Yellow illumination filled the study.

The Prefect stopped in front of his son. "Why does my own son, a bandeirante, a jefe of the Irmandades, spout these Carsonite stupidities?"

Joao looked at the floor between his boots. He felt both resentment and shame. To disturb his father this way, that was a hurtful thing, with the elder Martinho's delicate heart. But the old man was so blind!

"Those rabble farmers laughed at me," the elder Martinho said. "I told them we'd increase the green area by ten thousand hectares this month, and they laughed. 'Your own son does not even believe this!' they said. And they told me some of the things you had been saying."

"I am sorry I have caused you distress, father," Joao said. "The fact that I'm a bandeirante . . ." He shrugged. "How else could I have learned the truth about this extermination program?"

His father quivered.

"Joao! Do you sit there and tell me you took a false oath when you formed your Irmandades band?"

"That's not the way it was, father."

Joao pulled a sprayman's emblem from his breast pocket, fingered it. "I believed it . . . then. We could shape mutated bees to fill every gap in the insect ecology. This I believed. Like the Chinese, I said: 'Only the useful shall live!' But that was several years ago, father, and since then I have come to realize we don't have a complete understanding of what usefulness means."

"It was a mistake to have you educated in North America," his father said. "That's where you absorbed this Carsonite heresy. It's all well and good for *them* to refuse to join the rest of the world in the Ecological Realignment; they do not have as many million mouths to feed. But my own son!"

Joao spoke defensively: "Out in the red areas you see things, father. These things are difficult to explain. Plants look healthier

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out there and the fruit is . . ."

"A purely temporary thing," his father said. "We will shape bees to meet whatever need we find. The destroyers take food from our mouths. It is very simple. They must die and be replaced by creatures which serve a function useful to mankind."

"The birds are dying, father," Joao said.

"We are saving the birds! We have specimens of every kind in our sanctuaries. We will provide new foods for them to . . ."

"But what happens if our barriers are breached . . . before we can replace the population of natural predators? What happens then?"

THE elder Martinho shook a thin finger under his son's nose. "This is nonsense! I will hear no more of it! Do you know what else those *mameluco* farmers said? They said they have seen bandeirantes reinfesting the green areas to prolong their jobs! That is what they said. This, too, is nonsense—but it is a natural consequence of defeatist talk just such as I have heard from you tonight. And every setback we suffer adds strength to such charges'!'

"Setbacks, father?"

"I have said it: setbacks!"

Senhor Prefect Martinho turned, paced to his desk and back. Again, he stopped in front of his son, placed hands on hips. "You refer to the Piratininga, of course?"

"You accuse me, father?"

"Your Irmandades were on that line."

"Not so much as a flea got through us!"

"Yet, a week ago the Piratininga was green. Now, it is crawling. Crawling!"

"I cannot watch every bandeirante in the Mato Grosso," Joao protested. "If they . . ."

"The IEO gives us only six months to clean up," the elder Martinho said. He raised his hands, palms up; his face was flushed. "Six months! Then they throw an embargo around all Brazil—the way they have done with North America." He lowered his hands. "Can you imagine the pressures on me? Can you imagine the things I must listen to about the bandeirantes and especially about my own son?"

Joao scratched his chin with the sprayman's emblem. The reference to the International Ecological Organization made him think of Dr. Rhin Kelly, the IEO's lovely field director. His mind pictured her as he had last seen her in the A' Chigua nightclub at Bahia—red-haired, green-eyed . . . so lovely and strange. But she had been missing almost six weeks now—somewhere in the *sertao*, and there were those who said she must be dead.

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Joao looked at his father. If only the old man weren't so excitable. "You excite yourself needlessly, father," he said. "The Piratininga was not a full barrier, just a . . ."

"Excite myself!"

The Prefect's nostrils dilated; he bent toward his son. "Already we have gone past two deadlines. We gained an extension when I announced you and the Bandeirantes of Diogo Alvarez had cleared the Piratininga. How do I explain now that it is reinfested, that we have the work to do over?"

Joao returned the sprayman's emblem to his pocket. It was obvious he'd not be able to reason with his father this night. Frustration sent a nerve quivering along Joao's jaw. The old man had to be told, though; someone had to tell him. And someone of his father's stature had to get back to the Bureau, shake them up there and make *them* listen.

The Prefect returned to his desk, sat down. He picked up an antique crucifix, one that the great Aleihadinho had carved in ivory. He lifted it, obviously seeking to restore his serenity, but his eyes went wide and glaring. Slowly, he returned the crucifix to its position on the desk, keeping his attention on it.

"Joao," he whispered.

It's his heart! Joao thought.

He leaped to his feet, rushed to his father's side. "Father! What is it?"

The elder Martinho pointed, hand trembling.

THROUGH the spiked crown of thorns, across the agonized ivory face, over the straining muscles of the Christ figure crawled an insect. It was the color of the ivory, faintly reminiscent of a beetle in shape, but with a multi-clawed fringe along its wings and thorax, and with furry edging to its abnormally long antennae.

The elder Martinho reached for a roll of papers to smash the insect, but Joao put out a hand restraining him. "Wait. This is a new one. I've never seen anything like it. Give me a handlight. We must follow it, find where it nests."

Senhor Prefect Martinho muttered under his breath, withdrew a small permalight from a drawer of the desk, handed the light to his son.

Joao peered at the insect, still not using the light. "How strange it is," he said. "See how it exactly matches the tone of the ivory."

The insect stopped, pointed its antennae toward the two men.

"Things have been seen," Joao said. "There are stories. Something like this was found near one of the barrier villages last month. It was inside the green

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area, on a path beside a river. Two farmers found it while searching for a sick man." Joao looked at his father. "They are very watchful of sickness in the newly green regions, you know. There have been epidemics . . . and that is another thing."

"There is no relationship," his father snapped. "Without insects to carry disease, we will have less illness."

"Perhaps," Joao said, and his tone said he did not believe it.

Joao returned his attention to the insect. "I do not think our ecologists know all they say they do. And I mistrust our Chinese advisors. They speak in such flowery terms of the benefits from eliminating useless insects, but they will not let us go into their green areas and inspect. Excuses. Always excuses. I think they are having troubles they do not wish us to know."

"That's foolishness," the elder Martinho growled, but his tone said this was not a position he cared to defend. "They are honorable men. Their way of life is closer to our socialism than it is to the decadent capitalism of North America. Your trouble is you see them too much through the eyes of those who educated you."

"I'll wager this insect is one of the spontaneous mutations," Joao said. "It is almost as though they appeared according to some plan. Find me something in which I may capture this creature and take it to the laboratory."

The elder Martinho remained standing by his chair. "Where will you say it was found?"

"Right here," Joao said.

"You will not hesitate to expose me to more ridicule?"

"But father . . ."

"Can't you hear what they will say? In his own home this insect is found. It is a strange new kind. Perhaps he breeds them there to reinfest the green."

"Now *you* are talking nonsense, father. Mutations are common in a threatened species. And we cannot deny there is threat to insect species—the poisons, the barrier vibrations, the traps. Get me a container, father. I cannot leave this creature, or I'd get a container myself."

"And you will tell where it was found?"

"I can do nothing else. We must cordon off this area, search it out. This could be . . . an accident . . ."

"Or a deliberate attempt to embarrass me."

JOAO took his attention from the insect, studied his father. *That* was a possibility, of course. The Carsonites had friends in many places . . . and some were fanatics who would stoop to any scheme. Still . . .

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Decision came to Joao. He returned his attention to the motionless insect. His father had to be told, had to be reasoned with at any cost. Someone whose voice carried authority had to get down to the Capitol and make them listen.

"Our earliest poisons killed off the weak and selected out those insects immune to this threat," Joao said. "Only the immune remained to breed. The poisons we use now . . . some of them, do not leave such loopholes and the deadly vibrations at the barriers . . ." He shrugged. "This is a form of beetle, father. I will show you a thing."

Joao drew a long, thin whistle of shiny metal from his pocket. "There was a time when this called countless beetles to their deaths. I had merely to tune it across their attraction spectrum." He put the whistle to his lips, blew while turning the end of it.

No sound audible to human ears came from the instrument, but the beetle's antennae writhed.

Joao removed the whistle from his mouth.

The antennae stopped writhing.

"It stayed put, you see," Joao said. "And there are indications of malignant intelligence among them. The insects are far from extinction, father . . . and they are beginning to strike back."

"Malignant intelligence, pah!"

"You must believe me, father," Joao said. "No one else will listen. They laugh and say we are too long in the jungle. And where is our evidence? And they say such stories could be expected from ignorant farmers but not from bandeirantes. You must listen, father, and believe. It is why I was chosen to come here . . . because you are my father and you might listen to your own son."

"Believe what?" the elder Martinho demanded, and he was the Prefect now, standing erect, glaring coldly at his son.

"In the sertao of Goyaz last week," Joao said, "Antonil Lisboa's bandeirante lost three men who . . ."

"Accidents."

"They were killed with formic acid and oil of copahu."

"They were careless with their poisons. Men grow careless when they . . ."

"Father! The formic acid was a particularly strong type, but still recognizable as having been . . . or being of a type manufactured by insects. And the men were drenched with it. While the oil of copahu . . ."

"You imply that insects such as this . . ." The Prefect pointed to the motionless creature on the crucifix. ". . . blind creatures such as this . . ."

"They're not blind, father."

"I did not mean literally blind,

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but without intelligence," the elder Martinho said. "You cannot be seriously implying that these creatures attacked humans and killed them."

"We have yet to discover precisely how the men were slain," Joao said. "We have only their bodies and the physical evidence at the scene. But there have been other deaths, father, and men missing and we grow more and more certain that . . ."

He broke off as the beetle crawled off the crucifix onto the desk. Immediately, it darkened to brown, blending with the wood surface.

"Please, father. Get me a container."

The beetle reached the edge of the desk, hesitated. Its antennae curled back, then forward.

"I will get you a container only if you promise to use discretion in your story of where this creature was found," the Prefect said.

"Father, I . . ."

THE beetle leaped off the desk far out into the middle of the room, scuttled to the wall, up the wall, into a crack beside a window.

Joao pressed the switch of the handlight, directed its beam into the hole which had swallowed the strange beetle.

"How long has this hole been here, father?"

"For years. It was a flaw in the masonry . . . an earthquake, I believe."

Joao turned, crossed to the door in three strides, went through an arched hallway, down a flight of stone steps, through another door and short hall, through a grillwork gate and into the exterior garden. He set the handlight to full intensity, washed its blue glare over the wall beneath the study window.

"Joao, what are you doing?"

"My job, father," Joao said. He glanced back, saw that the elder Martinho had stopped just outside the gate.

Joao returned his attention to the exterior wall, washed the blue glare of light on the stones beneath the window. He crouched low, running the light along the ground, peering behind each clod, erasing all shadows.

His searching scrutiny passed over the raw earth, turned to the bushes, then the lawn.

Joao heard his father come up behind.

"Do you see it, son?"

"No, father."

"You should have allowed me to crush it."

From the outer garden that bordered the road and the stone fence, there came a piercing stridulation. It hung on the air in almost tangible waves, making Joao think of the hunting cry of jungle predators. A shiver

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moved up his spine. He turned toward the driveway where he had parked his airtruck, sent the blue glare of light stabbing there.

He broke off, staring at the lawn. "What is that?"

The ground appeared to be in motion, reaching out toward them like the curling of a wave on a beach. Already, they were cut off from the house. The wave was still some ten paces away, but moving in rapidly.

Joao stood up, clutched his father's arm. He spoke quietly, hoping not to alarm the old man further. "We must get to my truck, father. We must run across them."

"Them?"

"Those are like the insect we saw inside, father—millions of them. Perhaps they are not beetles, after all. Perhaps they are like army ants. We must make it to the truck. I have equipment and supplies there. We will be safe inside. It is a bandeirante truck, father. You must run with me. I will help you."

They began to run, Joao holding his father's arm, pointing the way with the light.

Let his heart be strong enough, Joao prayed.

They were into the creeping wave of insects then, but the creatures leaped aside, opening a pathway which closed behind the running men.

The white form of the airtruck loomed out of the shadows at the far curve of the driveway about fifteen meters ahead.

"Joao . . . my heart," the elder Martinho gasped.

"You can make it," Joao panted. "Faster!" He almost lifted his father from the ground for the last few paces.

THEY were at the wide rear door into the truck's lab compartment now. Joao yanked open the door, slapped the light switch, reached for a spray hood and poison gun. He stopped, stared into the yellow-lighted compartment.

Two men sat there—sertao Indians by the look of them, with bright glaring eyes and bang-cut black hair beneath straw hats. They looked to be identical twins—even to the mud-grey clothing and sandals, the leather shoulder bags. The beetle-like insects crawled around them, up the walls, over the instruments and vials.

"What the devil?" Joao blurted.

One of the pair held a qena flute. He gestured with it, spoke in a rasping, oddly inflected voice: "Enter. You will not be harmed if you obey."

Joao felt his father sag, caught the old man in his arms. How light he felt! Joao stepped up into the truck, carrying his fa-

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ther. The elder Martinho breathed in short, painful gasps. His face was a pale blue and sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Joao," he whispered. "Pain . . . my chest."

"Medicine, father," Joao said. "Where is your medicine."

"House," the old man said.

"It appears to be dying," one of the Indians rasped.

Still holding his father in his arms, Joao whirled toward the pair, blazed: "I don't know who you are or why you loosed those bugs here, but my father's dying and needs help. Get out of my way!"

"Obey or both die," said the Indian with the flute.

"He needs his medicine and a doctor," Joao pleaded. He didn't like the way the Indian pointed that flute. The motion suggested the instrument was actually a weapon.

"What part has failed?" asked the other Indian. He stared curiously at Joao's father. The old man's breathing had become shallow and rapid.

"It's his heart," Joao said. "I know you farmers don't think he's acted fast enough for . . ."

"Not farmers," said the one with the flute. "Heart?"

"Pump," said the other.

"Pump." The Indian with the flute stood up from the bench at the front of the lab, gestured down. "Put . . . father here."

The other one got off the bench, stood aside.

In spite of fear for his father, Joao was caught by the strange look of this pair, the fine, scale-like lines in their skin, the glittering brilliance of their eyes.

"Put father here," repeated the one with the flute, pointing at the bench. "Help can be . . ."

"Attained," said the other one.

"Attained," said the one with the flute.

Joao focused now on the masses of insects around the walls, the waiting quietude in their ranks. They *were* like the one in the study.

The old man's breathing was now very shallow, very rapid.

He's dying, Joao thought in desperation.

"Help can be attained," repeated the one with the flute. "If you obey, we will not harm."

The Indian lifted his flute, pointed it at Joao like a weapon. "Obey."

There was no mistaking the gesture.

Slowly, Joao advanced, deposited his father gently on the bench.

THE other Indian bent over the elder Martinho's head, raised an eyelid. There was a professional directness about the gesture. The Indian pushed gently on the dying man's diaphragm, removed the Prefect's belt, loos-

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ened his collar. A stubby brown finger was placed against the artery in the old man's neck.

"Very weak," the Indian rasped.

Joao took another, closer look at this Indian, wondering at a sertao backwoodsman who behaved like a doctor.

"We've got to get him to a hospital," Joao said. "And his medicine in . . ."

"Hospital," the Indian agreed.

"Hospital?" asked the one with the flute.

A low, stridulant hissing came from the other Indian.

"Hospital," said the one with the flute.

That stridulant hissing! Joao stared at the Indian beside the Prefect. The sound had been reminescent of the weird call that had echoed across the lawn.

The one with the flute poked him, said: "You will go into front and maneuver this . . ."

"Vehicle," said the one beside Joao's father.

"Vehicle," said the one with the flute.

"Hospital?" Joao pleaded.

"Hospital," agreed the one with the flute.

Joao looked once more to his father. The other Indian already was strapping the elder Martinho to the bench in preparation for movement. How competent the man appeared in spite of his backwoods look.

"Obey," said the one with the flute.

Joao opened the door into the front compartment, slipped through, feeling the other one follow. A few drops of rain spattered darkly against the curved windshield. Joao squeezed into the operator's seat, noted how the Indian crouched behind him, flute pointed and ready.

A dark gun of some kind, Joao guessed.

He punched the igniter buttor on the dash, strapped himself in while waiting for the turbines to build up speed. The Indian still crouched behind him, vulnerable now if the airtruck were spun sharply. Joao flicked the communications switch on the lower left corner of the dash, looked into the tiny screen there giving him a view of the lab compartment. The rear doors were open. He closed them by hydraulic remote. His father was securely strapped to the bench now, Joao noted, but the other Indian was equally secured.

The turbines reached their whining peak. Joao switched on the lights, engaged the hydrostatic drive. The truck lifted six inches, angled upward as Joao increased pump displacement. He turned left onto the street, lifted another two meters to increase speed, headed toward the lights of a boulevard.

The Indian spoke beside his

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ear: "You will turn toward the mountain over there." A hand came forward, pointing to the right.

The Alejandro Clinic is there in the foothills, Joao thought.

He made the indicated turn down a cross street angling toward the boulevard.

Casually, he gave pump displacement another boost, lifted another meter and increased speed once more. In the same motion, he switched on the intercom to the rear compartment, tuned for the spare amplifier and pickup in the compartment beneath the bench where his father lay.

The pickup, capable of making a dropped pin sound like a cannon, gave forth only a distant hissing and rasping. Joao increased amplification. The instrument should have been transmitting the old man's heartbeats now, sending a noticeable drum-thump into the forward cabin.

There was nothing.

Tears blurred Joao's eyes, and he shook his head to clear them.

My father is dead, he thought. *Killed by these crazy backwoodsmen.*

HE noted in the dash screen that the Indian back there had a hand under the elder Martinho's back. The Indian appeared to be massaging the dead man's back, and a rhythmic rasping matched the motion.

Anger filled Joao. He felt like diving the airtruck into an abutment, dying himself to kill these crazy men.

They were approaching the outskirts of the city, and ring-girders circled off to the left giving access to the boulevard. This was an area of small gardens and cottages protected by over-fly canopies.

Joao lifted the airtruck above the canopies, headed toward the boulevard.

To the clinic, yes, he thought. *But it is too late.*

In that instant, he realized there were no heartbeats at all coming from that rear compartment—only that slow, rhythmic grating, a faint susuration and a cicada-like hum up and down scale.

"To the mountains, there," said the Indian behind him.

Again, the hand came forward to point off to the right.

Joao, with that hand close to his eyes and illuminated by the dash, saw the scale-like parts of a finger shift position slightly. In that shift, he recognized the scale-shapes by their claw fringes.

The beetles!

The finger was composed of linked beetles working in unison!

Joao turned, stared into the *Indian's* eyes, seeing now why they glistened so: they were composed of thousands of tiny facets.

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"Hospital, there," the creature beside him said, pointing.

Joao turned back to the controls, fighting to keep from losing composure. They were not Indians . . . they weren't even human. They were insects—some kind of hive-cluster shaped and organized to mimic a man.

The implications of this discovery raced through his mind. How did they support their weight? How did they feed and breathe?

How did they speak?

Everything had to be subordinated to the urgency of getting this information and proof of it back to one of the big labs where the facts could be explored.

Even the death of his father could not be considered now. He had to capture one of these things, get out with it.

He reached overhead, flicked on the command transmitter, set its beacon for a homing call. *Let some of my Irmaos be awake and monitoring their sets,* he prayed.

"More to the right," said the creature behind him.

Again, Joao corrected course.

The moon was high overhead now, illuminating a line of bandeirante towers off to the left. The first barrier.

They would be out of the green area soon and into the grey—then, beyond that, another barrier and the great red that stretched out in reaching fingers through the Goyaz and the Mato Grosso. Joao could see scattered lights of Resettlement Plan farms ahead, and darkness beyond.

The airtruck was going faster than he wanted, but Joao dared not slow it. They might become suspicious.

"You must go higher," said the creature behind him.

Joao increased pump displacement, raised the nose. He levelled off at three hundred meters.

MORE bandeirante towers loomed ahead, spaced at closer intervals. Joao picked up the barrier signals on his meters, looked back at the *Indian.* The dissembler vibrations seemed not to affect the creature.

Joao looked out his side window and down. No one would challenge him, he knew. This was a bandeirante airtruck headed *into* the red zone . . . and with its transmitter sending out a homing call. The men down there would assume he was a band leader headed out on a contract after a successful bid—and calling his men to him for the job ahead.

He could see the moon-silvered snake of the Sao Francisco winding off to his left, and the lesser waterways like threads ravelled out of the foothills.

I must find the nest—where we're headed, Joao thought. He wondered if he dared turn on his receiver—but if his men started

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reporting in . . . No. That could make the creatures suspect; they might take violent counter-action.

My men will realize something is wrong when I don't answer, he thought. *They will follow.*

If any of them hear my call.

Hours droned past.

Nothing but moonlighted jungle sped beneath them now, and the moon was low on the horizon, near setting. This was the deep red region where broadcast poisons had been used at first with disastrous results. This was where the wild mutations had originated. It was here that Rhin Kelly had been reported missing.

This was the region being saved for the final assault, using a mobile barrier line when that line could be made short enough.

Joao armed the emergency charge that would separate the front and rear compartments of the truck when he fired it. The stub wings of the front compartment and its emergency rocket motors could get him back into bandeirante country.

With the *specimen* sitting behind him safely subdued, Joao hoped.

He looked up through the canopy, scanned the horizon as far as he could. Was that moonlight glistening on a truck far back to the right? He couldn't be sure.

"How much farther?" Joao asked.

"Ahead," the creature rasped.

Now that he was alert for it, Joao heard the modulated stridulation beneath that voice.

"But how long?" Joao asked. "My father . . ."

"Hospital for . . . the father . . . ahead," said the creature.

It would be dawn soon, Joao realized. He could see the first false line of light along the horizon behind. This night had passed so swiftly. Joao wondered if these creatures had injected some time-distorting drug into him without his knowing. He thought not. He was maintaining himself in the necessities of the moment. There was no time for fatigue or boredom when he had to record every landmark half-visible in the night, sense everything there was to sense about these creatures with him.

How did they coordinate all those separate parts?

They appeared conscious. Was that mimicry, too? What did they use for a brain?

DAWN came, revealing the plateau of the Mato Grosso. Joao looked out his windows. This region, he knew, stretched across five degrees of latitude and six degrees of longitude. Once, it has been a region of isolated *fazendas* farmed by independent blacks and by *sertanistos* chained to the *encomendero* plantation system. It was hard-

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wood jungles, narrow rivers with banks overgrown by lush trees and ferns, savannahs and tangled life.

Even in this age it remained primitive, a fact blamed largely on insects and disease. It was one of the last strongholds of *teeming* insect life, if the International Ecological Organization's reports could be believed.

Supplies for the bandeirantes making the assault on this insect stronghold would come by way of Sao Paulo, by air and by transport on the multi-decked highways, then on antique deisel trains to Itapira, on river runners to Bahus and by airtruck to Registo and Leopoldina on the Araguaya.

This area crawled with insects: wire worms in the roots of the savannahs, grubs digging in the moist black earth, hopping beetles, dart-like angita wasps, chalcis flies, chiggers, sphecidae, braconidae, fierce hornets, white termites, hemipteric crawlers, blood roaches, thrips, ants, lice, mosquitoes, mites, moths, exotic butterflies, mantidae—and countless unnatural mutations of them all.

This would be an expensive fight—unless it were stopped . . . because it already had been lost.

I mustn't think that way, Joao told himself. *Out of respect for my father.*

Maps of the IEO showed this region in varied intensities of red. Around the red ran a ring of grey with pink shading where one or two persistent forms of insect life resisted man's poisons, jelly flames, astringents, sonitoxics—the combination of flamant couroq and supersonics that drove insects from their hiding places into waiting death—and all the mechanical traps and lures in the bandeirante arsenal.

A grid map would be placed over this area and each thousand-acre square offered for bid to the independent bands to deinfest.

We bandeirantes are a kind of ultimate predator, Joao thought. *It's nō wonder these creatures mimic us.*

But how good, really, was the mimicry? he asked himself. And how deadly to the predators?

"There," said the creature behind him, and the multi-part hand came forward to point toward a black scarp visible ahead in the grey light of morning.

Joao's foot kicked a trigger on the floor releasing a great cloud of orange dye-fog beneath the truck to mark the ground and forest for a mile around under this spot. As he kicked the trigger, Joao began counting down the five-second delay to the firing of the separation charge.

It came in a roaring blast that Joao knew would smear the creature behind him against the rear

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bulkhead. He sent the stub wings out, fed power to the rocket motors and back hard around. He saw the detached rear compartment settling slowly earthward above the dye cloud, its fall cushioned as the pumps of the hydrostatic drive automatically compensated.

I will come back, father, Joao thought. *You will be buried among family and friends.*

He locked the controls, twisted in the seat to see what had happened to his captive.

A gasp escaped Joao's lips.

THE rear bulkhead crawled with insects clustered around something white and pulsing. The mud-grey shirt and trousers were torn, but insects already were repairing it, spinning out fibers that meshed and sealed on contact. There was a yellow sac-like extrusion near the pulsing white, and a dark brown skeleton with familiar articulation.

It looked like a human skeleton —but chitinous.

Before his eyes, the thing was reassembling itself, the long, furry antennae burrowing into the structure and interlocking.

The flute-weapon was not visible, and the thing's leather pouch had been thrown into a rear corner, but its eyes were in place in their brown sockets, staring at him. The mouth was reforming.

The yellow sac contracted, and a voice issued from the half-formed mouth.

"You must listen," it rasped.

Joao gulped, whirled back to the controls, unlocked them and sent the cab into a wild, spinning turn.

A high-pitched rattling buzz sounded behind him. The noise seemed to pick up every bone in his body and shake it. Something crawled on his neck. He slapped at it, felt it squash.

All Joao could think of was escape. He stared frantically out at the earth beneath, seeing a blotch of white in a savannah off to his right and, in the same instant, recognizing another airtruck banking beside him, the insignia of his own Irmandades band bright on its side.

The white blotch in the savannah was resolving itself into a cluster of tents with an IEO orange and green banner flying beside them.

Joao dove for the tents, praying the other airtruck would follow.

Something stung his cheek. They were in his hair—biting, stinging. He stabbed the braking rockets, aimed for open ground about fifty meters from the tents. Insects were all over the inside of the glass now, blocking his vision. Joao said a silent prayer, hauled back on the control arm, felt the cab mush out, touch ground, skidding and slewing

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across the savannah. He kicked the canopy release before the cab stopped, broke the seal on his safety harness and launched himself up and out to land sprawling in grass.

He rolled through the grass, feeling the insect bites like fire over every exposed part of his body. Hands grabbed him and he felt a jelly hood splash across his face to protect it. A voice he recognized as Thome of his own band said: "This way, Johnny! Run!" They ran.

He heard a spraygun fire: "Whooosh!"

And again.

And again.

Arms lifted him and he felt a leap.

They landed in a heap and a voice said: "Mother of God! Would you look at that!"

Joao clawed the jelly hood from his face, sat up to stare across the savannah. The grass seethed and boiled with insects around the uptilted cab and the airtruck that had landed beside it.

Joao looked around him, counted seven of his Irmaos with Thome, his chief sprayman, in command.

Beyond them clustered five other people, a red-haired woman slightly in front, half turned to look at the savannah and at him. He recognized the woman immediately: Dr. Rhin Kelly of the IEO. When they had met in the A' Chigua nightclub in Bahia, she had seemed exotic and desirable to Joao. Now, she wore a field uniform instead of gown and jewels, and her eyes held no invitation at all.

"I see a certain poetic justice in this . . . traitors," she said.

JOAO lifted himself to his feet, took a cloth proferred by one of his men, wiped off the last of the jelly. He felt hands brushing him, clearing dead insects off his coveralls. The pain of his skin was receding under the medicant jelly, and now he found himself dominated by puzzled questioning as he recognized the mood of the IEO personnel.

They were furious and it was directed at him . . . and at his fellow Irmandades.

Joao studied the woman, noting how her green eyes glared at him, the pink flush to her skin.

"Dr. Kelly?" Joao said.

"If it isn't Joao Martinho, jefe of the Irmandades," she said, "the traitor of the Piratininga."

"They are crazy, that is the only thing, I think," said Thome.

"Your pets turned on you, didn't they?" she demanded. "And wasn't that inevitable?"

"Would you be so kind as to explain," Joao said.

"I don't need to explain," she said. "Let your friends out there explain." She pointed toward the

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rim of jungle beyond the savannah.

Joao looked where she pointed, saw a line of men in bandeirante white standing untouched amidst the leaping, boiling insects in the jungle shadow. He took a pair of binoculars from around the neck of one of his men, focused on the figures. Knowing what to look for made the identification easy.

"Tommy," Joao said.

His chief sprayman, Thome, bent close, rubbing at an insect sting on his swarthy cheek.

In a low voice, Joao explained what the figures at the jungle edge were.

"Aieee," Thome said.

An Irnandade on Joao's left crossed himself.

"What was it we leaped across coming in here?" Joao asked.

"A ditch," Thome said. "It seems to be filled with couroq jelly . . . an insect barrier of some kind."

Joao nodded. He began to have unpleasant suspicions about their position here. He looked at Rhin Kelly. "Dr. Kelly, where are the rest of your people? Surely there are more than five in an IEO field crew."

Her lips compressed, but she remained silent.

"So?" Joao glanced around at the tents, seeing their weathered condition. "And where is your equipment, your trucks and lab huts and jitneys?"

"Funny thing you should ask," she said, but there was uncertainty atop the sneering quality of her voice. "About a kilometer into the trees over there . . ." She nodded to her left. ". . . is a wrecked jungle truck containing most of our . . . equipment, as you call it. The track spools of our truck were eaten away by acid."

"Acid?"

"It smelled like oxalic," said one of her companions, a blonde Nordic with a scar beneath his right eye.

"Start from the beginning," Joao said.

"We were cut off here almost six weeks ago," said the blond man. "Something got our radio, our truck—they looked like giant chiggers and they can shoot an acid spray about fifteen meters."

"There's a glass case containing three dead specimens in my lab tent," said Dr. Kelly.

Joao pursued his lips, thinking. "So?"

"I heard part of what you were telling your men there," she said. "Do you expect us to believe that?"

"It is of no importance to me what you believe," Joao said. "How did you get here?"

"We fought our way in here from the truck using *caramuru* cold-fire spray," said the blond man. "We dragged along what supplies we could, dug a trench

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around our perimeter, poured in the couroq powder, added the jell compound and topped it off with all our *copahu* oil . . . and here we sat."

"How many of you?" Joao asked.

"There were fourteen of us," said the man.

JOAO rubbed the back of his neck where the insect stings were again beginning to burn. He glanced around at his men, assessing their condition and equipment, counted four spray rifles, saw the men carried spare charge cylinders on slings around their necks.

"The airtruck will take us," he said. "We had better get out of here."

Dr. Kelly looked out to the savannah, said: "I think it has been too late for that since a few seconds after you landed, bandeirante. I think in a day or so there'll be a few less traitors around. You're caught in your own trap."

Joao whirled to stare at the airtruck, barked: "Tommy! Vince! Get . . ." He broke off as the airtruck sagged to its left.

"It's only fair to warn you," said Dr. Kelly, "to stay away from the edge of the ditch unless you first spray the opposite side. They can shoot a stream of acid at least fifteen meters . . . and as you can see . . ." She nodded toward the airtruck. ". . . the acid eats metal."

"You're insane," Joao said. "Why didn't you warn us immediately?"

"Warn you?"

Her blonde companion said: "Rhin, perhaps we . . ."

"Be quiet, Hogar," she said, and turned back to Joao. "We lost nine men to your playmates." She looked at the small band of Irmandades. "Our lives are little enough to pay now for the extinction of eight of you . . . traitors."

"You *are* insane," Joao said.

"Stop playing innocent, bandeirante," she said. "We have seen your companions out there. We have seen the new playmates you bred . . . and we understand that you were too greedy; now your game has gotten out of hand."

"You've not seen my Irmaos doing these things," Joao said. He looked at Thome. "Tommy, keep an eye on these insane ones." He lifted the spray rifle from one of his men, took the man's spare charges, indicated the other three armed men. "You —come with me."

"Johnny, what do you do?" Thome asked.

"Salvage the supplies from the truck," Joao said. He walked toward the ditch nearest the airtruck, laid down a hard mist of foamal beyond the ditch, beck-

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oned the others to follow and leaped the ditch.

LITTLE more than an hour later, with all of them acid burned—two seriously—the Irmandades retreated back across the ditch. They had salvaged less than a fourth of the equipment in the truck, and this did not include a transmitter.

"It is evident the little devils went first for the communications equipment," Thome said. "How could they tell?"

Joao said: "I do not want to guess." He broke open a first aid box, began treating his men. One had a cheek and shoulder badly splashed with acid. Another was losing flesh off his back.

Dr. Kelly came up, helped him treat the men, but refused to speak, even to answering the simplest question.

Finally, Joao touched up a spot on his own arm, neutralizing the acid and covering the burn with fleshtape. He gritted his teeth against the pain, stared at Rhin Kelly. "Where are these chigua you found?"

"Go find them yourself!" she snapped.

"You are a blind, unprincipled megalomaniac," Joao said, speaking in an even voice. "Do not push me too far."

Her face went pale and the green eyes blazed.

Joao grabbed her arm, hauled her roughly toward the tents. "Show me these chigua!"

She jerked free of him, threw back her red hair, stared at him defiantly. Joao faced her, looked her up and down with a calculating slowness.

"Go ahead, do violence to me," she said. "I'm sure I couldn't stop you."

"You act like a woman who wants . . . needs violence," Joao said. "Would you like me to turn you over to my men? They're a little tired of your raving."

Her face flamed. "You would not dare!"

"Don't be so melodramatic," he said. "I wouldn't give you the pleasure."

"You insolent . . . you . . ."

Joao showed her a wolfish grin, said: "Nothing you say will make me turn you over to my men!"

"Johnny."

It was Thome calling.

Joao turned, saw Thome talking to the nordic IEO man who had volunteered information. What had she called him? Hogar.

Thome beckoned.

Joao crossed to the pair, bent close as Thome signaled secrecy.

"The gentleman here says the female doctor was bitten by an insect that got past their barrier's fumes."

"Two weeks ago," Hogar whispered.

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"She has not been the same since," Thome said. "We humor her, jefe, no?"

Joao wet his lips with his tongue. He felt suddenly dizzy and too warm.

"The insect that bit her was similar to the ones that were on you," Hogar said, and his voice sounded apologetic.

They are making fun of me! Joao thought.

"I give the orders here!" he snapped.

"Y., jefe," Thome said. "But you . . ."

"What difference does it make who gives the orders?"

It was Dr. Kelly close behind him.

Joao turned, glared at her. How hateful she looked . . . in spite of her beauty.

"What's the difference?" she demanded. "We'll all be dead in a few days anyway." She stared out across the savannah. "More of your friends have arrived."

JOAO looked to the forest shadow, saw more human-like figures arriving. They appeared familiar and he wondered what it was—something at the edge of his mind, but his head hurt. Then he realized they looked like sertao Indians, like the pair who had lured him here. There were at least a hundred of them, apparently identical in every visible respect.

More were arriving by the second.

Each of them carried a qena flute.

There was something about the flutes that Joao felt he should remember.

Another figure came advancing through the *Indians*, a thin man in a black suit, his hair shiny silver in the sunlight.

"Father!" Joao gasped.

I'm sick, he thought. *I must be delerious.*

"That looks like the Prefect," Thome said. "Is it not so, Ramon?"

The Irmandade he addressed said: "If it is not the Prefect, it is his twin. Here, Johnny. Look with the glasses."

Joao took the glasses, focused on the figure advancing toward them through the grass. The glasses felt so heavy. They trembled in his hands and the figure coming toward them was blurred.

"I cannot see!" Joao muttered and he almost dropped the glasses.

A hand steadied him, and he realized he was reeling.

In an instant of clarity, he saw that the line of Indians had raised their flutes, pointing the IEO camp. That buzzing-rasping that had shaken his bones in the airtruck cab filled the universe around him. He saw his companions begin to fall.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 113)

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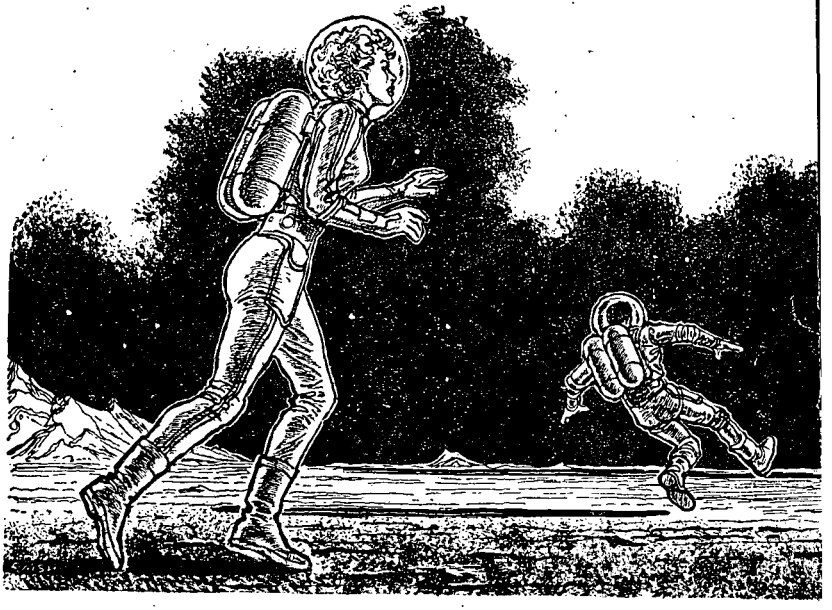
Across the frozen cliffs they loomed—the unbelievably ancient towers with the unimaginable engines deep inside them still pouring out their endless power. Dr. Sidney Lee, back from living death, vowed to find the secret of . . .

The TOWERS of

THE landing port at Titan had not changed much in five years.

The ship settled down on the scarred blast shield, beside the same trio of squat square buildings, and quickly disgorged its scanty quota of cargo and a lone passenger into the flexible tube that linked the loading hatch with the main building.

As soon as the tube was discon-



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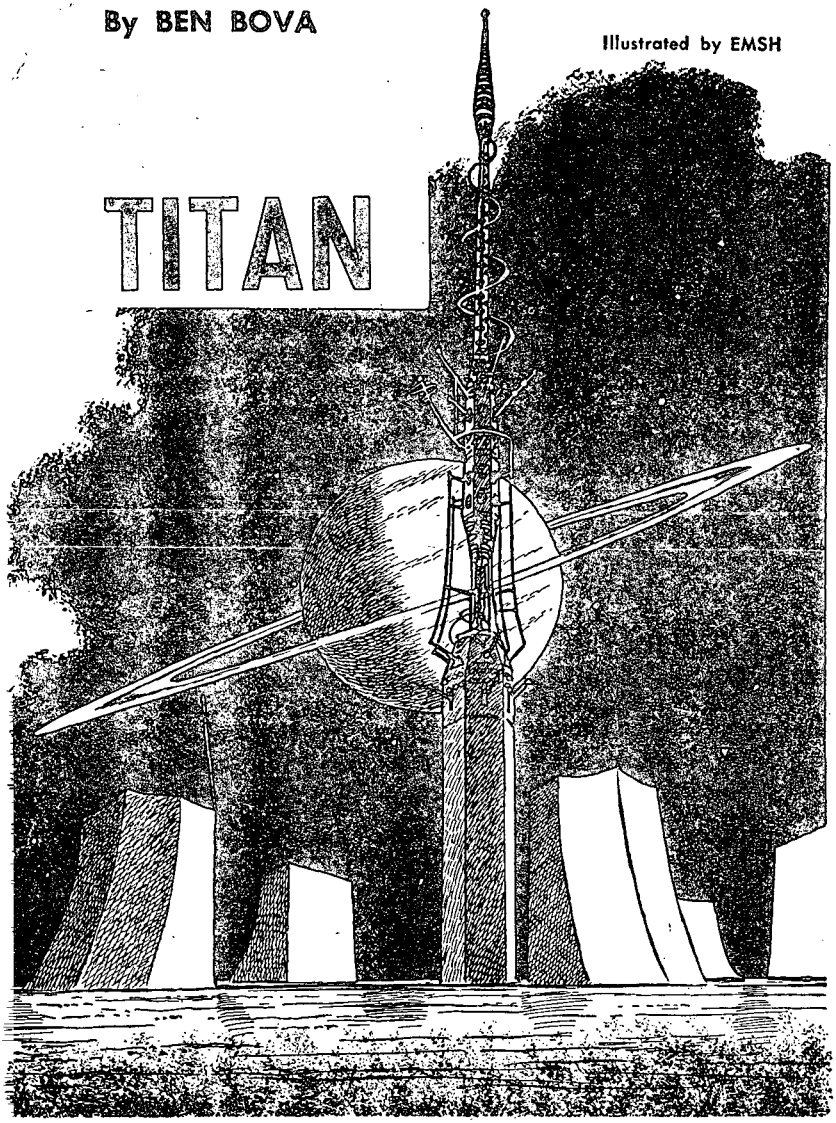
By BEN BOVA

Illustrated by EMSH

TITAN



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nected, the ship screamed off through the murky atmosphere, seemingly glad to get away from Titan and head back to the more comfortable and settled parts of the Solar System.

The passenger, Dr. Sidney Lee, stood by the window-wall of the main building and watched the ship disappear into the dark sky. He was tall and lean, seemingly all bone and tendon, with graying dark air and faintly haunted eyes set deep into a rough-hewn, weather-worn face. When the ship was nothing more than another star overhead, he turned and looked at the place.

Five years hasn't made any difference, he thought. The single room of the main port building was unchanged: a little grimier, perhaps, and a little more worn. But essentially unchanged. There were the same turnstiles and inspection machines, the same processing and handling gadgets for your papers and baggage, the same (it couldn't be, but they *looked* the same) two bored/techs sitting at the far end of the room, unwilling to lift an eyebrow unless specifically commanded to do so.

Lee walked over to the papers processor and pushed his credentials into its slot. After a few wheezes and clanks its green light flickered on and the papers fell into the "return" bin properly stamped and approved. At the same time, his lone bag slid along a conveyor belt and onto the pickup table.

With his credentials back inside his jacket and the bag in hand, Lee looked toward the two clerks. They were studiously avoiding his eyes, searching intently through some schedules that they kept on hand for just such emergencies.

"Sid! Hi!"

He turned at the sound of her voice.

"I'm sorry to be late," she said, hurrying across the big empty room, "but we never know when the Ancient Mariner is going to arrive. It's not a matter of whether it'll be on schedule or not . . . just a question of guessing how late it's going to be."

He smiled at her. "Hello, Elaine. It's good to see you again."

She hadn't changed either, and this time he was glad of it. She was still slim and young, her hair a reddish gold, her eyes gray-green. She was dressed with typical casualness: comfortable boots, dark slacks and sweater that outlined her trim figure, and a light green scarf for a touch of color. Outwardly, at least, she seemed cheerful.

"Come on," she said, "I've got a buggy in the parking area. I wanted to get a few more of the old gang to come out and meet

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you, but there's not many of them left, and they're all pretty busy . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I didn't expect a brass band and a key to the city," Lee said. Then he added, "You're pretty gay for a female scientist," he said.

"I'm always gay when I meet old friends again."

He said nothing.

"I wish you'd cheer up," Elaine coaxed.

"I will; give me time."

THEY entered the parking building and got into a bubble-top car. Elaine gunned it to life, and they slid out of the near-empty parking area, through the pressure doors, and into Titan's unbreathable atmosphere.

"Have you been here straight through since I left?" he asked.

"No. I spent about eighteen months on Venus, slushing through the swamps in search of ruins that couldn't possibly have survived a century in that climate."

"And?"

"That's it," she said, shrugging. "Something ventured but nothing found. So I asked to be returned here."

"It's got you, too, hasn't it?"

Her face became serious for the first time. "Certainly it's got me. It's got all of us. Do you think we'd stay out here otherwise?"

"Anything new turned up?"

Elaine shook her head. "Nothing you haven't seen in the reports. Which means nothing, really."

He lapsed into silence and watched the frozen landscape slide by as the car raced along Titan's only highway. They crossed a bleak, frozen plain, bluish-white in the dim twilight from the distant Sun. The stars twinkling in the dark sky overhead made the barren scene look even colder. The road climbed across a row of hills, and as they made a turn around the highest bluff, Saturn came into view.

No matter how many times Lee had seen the planet, it had always thrilled him. Now, five years later, it was still an experience. Three times larger than the full moon as seen from Earth, daubed with brilliant yellow, red and orange stripes, and circled about its middle by the impossible-looking rings, Saturn hung fat and low on the horizon, casting shadows stronger than the Sun's.

"It's a compensation, isn't it?" Elaine said.

Soon they were down on the plain again, but now it was a shattered, broken expanse of jagged rock and ice. A greenish methane cloud drifted over the face of Saturn, and Lee finally turned his eyes away.

"You can see the towers from here," Elaine reminded him.

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"I know," he said. He could not make out any detail, but there they were, just as they had been for—how long? Ten thousand years? A hundred thousand? Five towers jutting straight up from the bleak plain, clustered around a central, taller tower.

"Is the machinery still running?" he asked, pointlessly.

"Of course."

"There was some talk a year or so back about trying to stop it."

She shook her head. "They wouldn't dare."

THE machine had been discovered more than ten years earlier, when the first Earthmen landed on Titan. Saturn's largest satellite was devoid of life, a world of dark and cold, of hydrogen atmosphere and methane clouds, of ammonia seas and ice mountains.

And there in the midst of it all stood the machine: a brazenly unconcealed cluster of mammoth buildings, with its five stately towers surmounted by the soaring central sixth. And within, row upon row of unexplained machinery, fully automated, operating continuously in perfect order.

Alien.

The discoverors soon concluded that the machine was unbelievably old, older than the Egyptian pyramids, perhaps even older than the Martian canals. And it was running smoothly. For untold centuries, for uncounted millenia, it had continued to operate efficiently, tended only by automatic machines.

A clear challenge to the spacerovers from Earth. Who made this machine? How does it work? Why is it here? What is it doing?

As soon as its discovery was made known, the machine was visited by a steady stream of Earthmen—physicists, archeologists, engineers of a thousand different specialties, and soldiers, politicians, men who were now forced to believe the inevitable. The machine was photographed, x-rayed, blueprinted, analyzed spectroscopically, philosophically, even theologically.

Who built it? How does it work? Why is it here?

No answers.

Dr. Sidney Lee, an anthropologist who had made a name for himself by unraveling the history of the ruins on Mars, arrived on Titan full of optimism and enthusiasm. Twenty months later he was taken from Titan to a psychomedical center on Earth—completely irrational and suffering from man's oldest dread: the unknown.

* * *

Returning to the underground

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center that had grown over the years near the machine, to house the living and working quarters of the tiny scientific community on Titan, was something like returning home for Dr. Lee. Someone had seen to it that he got his old quarters back again. Most of the people he had known from five years ago had gone elsewhere, but a few remained.

LEE spent his first few days renewing acquaintances and meeting the new men and women. He was surprised at their youth, until he tried to recall how he must have looked and acted when he first arrived on Titan.

"Makes you realize how time takes its toll, regardless of geriatrics," he said to Dr. Kimball Bennett. Official director of the center, Bennett had called Lee into his office for a chat.

"Come on now," Bennett scoffed, "you're talking like a man of ninety. Why, you won't need geriatrics for at least another month."

They both laughed. Bennett was a shy-looking, slender astrophysicist who spoke softly, never seemed to exert himself, and yet commanded the unabashed admiration of every member of the center.

"All right," Lee said. "You didn't call me to discuss my failing years. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, I just thought it's about time you got to work. You've been loafing around for a week now. We can't afford to feed you free forever, you know."

"No, I guess you can't," Lee agreed, smiling.

Bennett leaned back in his chair and studied Lee for a long moment. "I won't ask you why you wanted to come back. But I was delighted when I saw the paperwork with your name on it. Want to know why?"

"Now I am curious."

"I want to leave Titan. I've been heading this operation for too many years, now. I want out. And I really can't leave until I have a top-notch man to run this little show. You're my replacement."

"As director?"

"Yes."

"Not me," Lee said, shaking his head. "I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Why? Hell, Kim, you saw them carry me out of here five years ago. How do you know the same thing won't happen again? How do I know it?"

A trace of a smile flickered across Bennett's face. "Look, the fact that you returned to Titan —to this center and to that infernal machine out there—well, that's proof enough to me that you've licked whatever it was that caused your breakdown."

"Maybe you're satisfied," Lee

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countered, "but how about the rest of the staff? How will they feel about having a reconditioned neurotic heading the show?"

Bennett's smile broke into an open grin. "Self-pity is a terrible thing. Do you know what those kids think of you? You're Dr. Sidney Lee, the foremost xeno-anthropologist of the human race. You're the man who deciphered the Martian Script, who uncovered the ruins on Tau Ceti, who did the definitive studies on the cave man cultures on Sirius and Vega. Your troubles here on Titan are just a six-month incident in the middle of a dazzling career. Haven't you noticed the deference with which they've been treating you? You're a big man on this campus."

"I don't know . . ."

"It won't be a lifetime job," Bennett coaxed. "In a couple of years some of the young squirts around here will have acquired enough poise and self-control to run the show. Then you can go on to something else."

Lee got up from his chair and paced slowly to the bookshelf that lined one wall of the office. "Why don't you stay on for another year or so, and then turn it over to one of the youngsters?"

Bennett wordlessly extended his arms over the desk. His hands were trembling, almost imperceptibly, but trembling.

Lee stared at the hands. "You too?"

Bennett placed his hands palms down on the desk. "Do you think you're the only one who worries about an alien race who can build a machine that we can't understand after ten years of investigation and study?"

THE official transfer took place the followng day, shortly after breakfast. Bennett called a meeting of the six department heads and announced that he would leave Titan on the next ship. It came as no surprise.

"From here on, I'm just an interested observer," he said. "Dr. Lee is in charge." He paused for a moment, then went on, "I thought this would be a good time to review what's been going on most recently, and where we stand."

Lee took an old pipe out of his jacket pocket and filled it while he watched them try to decide who would talk first. The six department heads all looked young and eager, he thought. Elaine was among them, of course, as head of the archeology group.

After a bit of finger-pointing and head-shaking, Dr. Richards took the floor. Head of the physics section, he had one of those open, clear-eyed, crew-cut faces that would look young even after his hair turned gray.

"It just so happens," he began,

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"that we finished a study yesterday that may be of some slight significance." From the size of his grin, Lee judged that the physicist was making a weak attempt to underplay his speech.

Richards walked to the viewscreen at the far end of the room and turned a dial. The screen flickered for a moment, then showed a chart.

"You remember from our last meeting," he said, "that our group finally succeeded in reaching the generating unit that powers all the machinery out there. Uh, Dr. Lee, this is something we've been working on for more than a year. The power unit is buried in the sublevel of the main building out there, and it's damned difficult to get to it without tearing out other machines. We finally wormed a man down there about a month ago."

RICHARDS turned back to the rest of the group. "This chart shows what we've been able to learn about the power unit. Which isn't much. There's no input to it. No batteries, no solar cells, nothing. There's a fuel tank—at least, we think it's a fuel tank—that's sunk inside a cryogenic magnetic coil."

Elaine spoke up. "You told us that last time. Have you been able to get into the tank?"

Richards shook his head. "Not unless we break up the coil, which we don't dare try. It would probably mean destroying the power unit and stopping all the machinery. And we can't do *that* until we're certain of what the machinery's doing."

"We all know that," said Dr. Kulaki, a wiry Polynesian who headed the electronics group.

"Yes. Well, we did make a very elegant experiment," Richards continued, "a variation of Cavendish's experiment to obtain the gravitational constant, in the Eighteenth Century . . ."

"Spare the history," Dr. Kurtzman said, half-smiling.

"Okay, okay," Richards said. "We determined the mass of the fuel tank, and therefore of the fuel in it. The tank contains a degenerate gas . . ."

"What?"

"A degenerate gas," Richards repeated. "The stuff must weigh several tons per spoonful."

Dr. Petchkovich, the astronomer, frowned puzzledly. "Wait a minute. Degenerate gases are found only in the cores of certain types of stars . . . are you saying that this magnetic field they've put around the fuel tank is strong enough to create a pressure similar to the weight of a star?"

"Take a look at the chart," Richards said, pointing to the viewscreen. "If you know of any other type of substance with a density like that, I'll eat it.

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There was a brief conversation, then Dr. Bennett said, "All right, Pat. Is that all?"

"Hell no," Richards said, his cat-like grin returning. "There's more."

He tapped a button on the viewscreen control panel, and another chart came up on the screen.

WE KNOW the power output of the generator. That was simply obtained, since the one unit powers all the machinery in the buildings out there. So we calculated all the known methods for obtaining power from a degenerate gas, and checked them against the amount of fuel the system has used up so far . . ."

Lee interrupted. "How do you know how much fuel has been used if you can't get into the tank?"

Richards' grin broadened. "Oh, that's easy, Dr. Lee. We know how much a degenerate gas should weigh, per unit volume. We know the size of the tank, and therefore how much it can hold, when full. So we can estimate how full the tank is simply by measuring its mass and comparing it to the mass it would have if it were full."

"Doesn't the chemical composition of the gas have any effect on the mass? Wouldn't uranium be heavier than hydrogen?"

"Yes, but not much. A factor of a hundred. You'll see in a minute that it's not enough to matter at this stage of the game."

Lee nodded and the physicist went on. "Well, anyway, you can check out our math in the report we'll issue later this month. But it turns out that the only possible energy source for this gadget is total annihilation of the gas particles into energy."

"Total annihilation? How?"

"That's a good question. I don't think we'll be able to answer it until we can start taking the damned machine apart." He flicked a new graph on the screen. "But, we can calculate how long the thing has been running, on the basis of the fuel it's used up, and the energy rates we've assumed . . ."

A slow wave of astonishment crept through the small room as, one by one, they grasped the significance of the curving lines on the graph.

"That's right," Richards said. "Unless our rough calculations are completely off the beam, which I doubt, the damned thing has been operating continuously for something like ten-to-the-fifth or ten-to-the-sixth Earth years."

A hundred thousand to a million years.

The rest of the meeting was quiet and orderly. They were all subdued by Richards' report. *It's been running continuously for a*

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million years, Lee kept thinking. *A million years.*

He listened automatically as the other department heads made their reports.

Ray Kurtzman was first. His report was actually a combined discussion of the work that his engineering group, and Dr. Kulaki's electronics people, had been jointly undertaking. They had tried to determine (for the *n*th time) just what sort of power was being beamed by the antennas atop the machine's towers. No luck. The machinery was using power, the antennas were broadcasting *something,* but whatever it was could not be detected by any instrument the Kurtzman and Kulaki had applied to the problem.

Elaine gave a routine report on the latest digging expeditions that had been sent out. No artifacts, no foundations, no remains of any sort. Blank.

Dr. Childe, a short, sharp-voiced mathematician, gave his report on his department's analysis of the wave patterns that were being sent out by the antennas. The patterns had been deduced from the fluctuations in energy consumption by the antenna equipment. Childe reported another blank. The patterns were completely random.

"It's foolish to call them patterns at all," Childe complained. "They look more like the ramblings of an idiot than anything produced by intelligence."

FINALLY, Petchkovich reported on the latest astronomical studies. The antennas were tracking an empty section of space between the Sun and the planet Mercury. Careful observations had shown no noticeable effect in the widespread area where the antennas were focused.

"It is my belief," he concluded, "that the antennas were originally focused on one of the planets, but have since become disoriented in some way, and are now well off-target."

Kurtzman huffed. "Not very likely. If they—whoever they are—could make this whole damned set of buildings full of machinery to operate continuously for a million years, do you think they'd slip up on where the antennas are pointing?"

"If it's a million years we're talking about," Petchkovich answered slowly, "then the chances for errors are simply that much greater."

Lee decided it was time for him to step in. "Have there been any other attempts to date the buildings or the machines? Radioactive decay rates, or something like that?"

Elaine nodded. "It's been tried at least once or twice a year, every year. Nothing conclusive has ever been established. The build-

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ings are obviously very old . . . but a million years . . ."

They all lapsed into silence.

Lee took a deep breath and began once more. "This million-year-business throws a new light on the whole subject. Up to now, I think, we've all been looking at this machine on a day-to-day basis. I mean, we've been examining what it's doing *now*. It might be worth our while to sit back a little and try to extrapolate the behavior we've observed back over a million years."

"Could you be a bit more explicit?" Richards asked.

"I'll try. It's mostly a matter of viewpoint, I think. Let's start looking at this machine as something that's been in operation for a million years. Let's admit to ourselves that what we see today is only a very small slice of the whole picture. Dr. Petchkovich, you're an astronomer; you're accustomed to studying a star for a few months and coming up with a story that covers perhaps billions of years. Right?"

"Yes, but this is entirely different . . ."

"I know. I know," Lee said. "But the line of attack isn't so different. For instance: Dr. Childe, suppose you send your wave patterns to the Orbital Computation Center at Earth and have the Big Brain work them over. Do you think it might come up with something useful?"

Childe shrugged elaborately. "Maybe. If we try to extrapolate the sample patterns we have now over a million years, maybe something will show up."

"It'll take months to get the Big Brain's time," Elaine said. "They're waiting in line all the way back to Mars for it."

"What are months compared to the time we've already spent?" Bennett countered.

"Or to a million years?" Lee added.

Kulaki suddenly started to bob up and down in his chair. "Say, we might be on the track of something here," he said. "If those circuits have been in continuous operation for a million years . . . we could learn an awful lot about reliability . . ."

Lee nodded in agreement. "We have a lot to learn, that's true enough." He cleared his throat nervously. "There's one more thing, I am about to publish a paper . . . it's a sort of a general paper, but it has some bearing on the work going on here. I wonder if you'd be good enough to be a tryout audience for me?"

They sat back to listen.

LEE gave only the basic outline of his paper. He discussed his findings among the ruins on Mars and on the lone planet circling the star Tau Ceti; and he drew some conclusions from his investigations of the primitive

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human cultures found on the planetary systems of Sirius and Vega.

First, both Sirius and Vega have both been long known to be comparatively young stars. Astrophysical evidence compiled from the Twentieth Century onward, and finally geophysical data from the planets themselves, showed that Sirius and Vega—and their planets—were considerably less than a billion years old. By contrast, the Solar System was known to be at least five billion years old.

Now, the development of life takes time. It took close to three billion years for life to make its first appearance on Earth. Another two billion years of evolution were necessary before man arose.

"If the planets circling Sirius and Vega are less than one billion years old," Lee stated, "then the human populations of those planets—no matter how primitive they are—*could not have originated there.* They must have come from another planetary system. The closest system that could have born life on its own is our Solar System."

Second, the ruins on Tau Ceti and on Mars were both definitely built by human beings. The plans of the buildings, their furnishings and utensils, the scant writings and pictures that survived—all were of human origin.

"Although dating the time of destruction of these buildings is very difficult," Lee went on, "we can definitely say two things: they were destroyed suddenly in some immense cataclysm; and they were destroyed at very nearly the same time, both on Mars and Tau Ceti. I hadn't realized the correlation until this morning, but the destruction might easily be dated at approximately one million years ago."

There was a stir of reaction at the mention of the time period.

Also, Lee told them, he had been able to partially translate one of the folk tales of the Vegan people.

"Stripped of its nonessentials, it tells of a cataclysmic war between the ancestors of the Vegan people and another race, mentioned only as the Others."

He paused and looked at them, sitting around the table. They seemed engrossed.

"The Vegan folk tales relate that the Others won an overwhelming victory, and smashed forever their Golden Age, when they travelled through the skies and lived in unbelievable splendor.

"I'd like to make one final point. The Vegan and Sirian peoples are hardly human, by our standards. In addition to slight physiological differences, they live in caves and eat shellfish and giant insects. They do not hunt

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meat-bearing animals, simply because there are not yet any meat-bearing animals on their planets. The humans on those planets did not evolve there; they are a billion years ahead of the natural evolution of their worlds."

Bennett spoke up. "In other words, they were originally a colony from Earth."

"Exactly."

"That's a lot to swallow in one sitting," Patrick said, quietly.

"I know," Lee answered. "But it fits in with what we've found here. Elaine, I'm certain that if you knew where to look, you could find on Earth the remains of a human civilization that is more than a million years old . . ."

She shook her head. "That's contrary to every known scrap of evidence about early man. Besides, a million years of weathering would wipe out almost anything on Earth. Wind, rain, Ice Ages, earthquakes . . . it would be impossible."

"What about the Moon?" Petchkovich asked. "There should be some archeological evidence on the Moon that hasn't been completely destroyed. Maybe buried under the dust or lava flows . . ."

"At any rate," Lee said, "I'm convinced that there was a human culture a million years ago. that it expanded out through the Solar System and to the stars; that it met an implacably hostile alien race; and that the humans were utterly defeated. Nearly wiped out."

"And the machine out there?"

"It was built by the Others. It's alien. And hostile," Lee said. "That's why we must find out what it's doing, and how."

YOU could feel the change in attitude throughout the center after that conference. An invisible, but almost palpable wave of tension swept through every office, every lab, every section of the underground community. Not everyone believed Lee's theory about the Others. But they could never look at those strange buildings again without wondering. What had been a puzzling, frustrating riddle took on the attributes of a living, intelligent enemy; an enemy that mocked their efforts to understand, to control; an enemy that seemed in every way superior to the feeble powers of the men from Earth.

A FEW days after that conference, Dr. Bennett left Titan for good. Lee was in full command now.

He was just finishing a quick lunch at the robocafeteria when Elaine walked by and stopped at his table.

"Hi boss. I'm on my way out to the buildings. Want to come along?"

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Lee punched a button at the end of the table, and the dishes slid into a wall receptacle. "No thanks," he said. "I've got some paperwork to do . . ."

"Sid, you're going to have to come out and face it sooner or later. Why don't you come now? There's practically nobody there."

He looked up at her. "You're not a part-time psychotech, are you?"

"No," she said, grinning. "But I wouldn't want anybody to start thinking that you're afraid to go into the buildings. And I especially don't want *you* to think that."

"Okay," he said, getting up from his chair. "You're right . . . as usual."

They took a lift chute to the surface bubble, a dome of clear plastisteel that housed ground vehicles and miscellaneous outdoor equipment. There they squirmed into pressure suits, complete with fishbowl helmets. After checking out their oxygen tanks, heaters and radios, they were ready to go outside.

"Want to walk?" Elaine asked.

Lee nodded.

It took him a few minutes to get accustomed to the low-gravity shuffle that you must employ to walk on Titan, with its one-third Earth gravity.

They headed for the buildings, under the double shadows cast by the distant Sun and the ever-present, overpowering Saturn. The buildings loomed straight up from the dark plain, gaunt gloomy specters from a bygone age haunting this shadow world. There were five low, square featureless structures ringed around a central pentagonally-shaped tower that swept upward to a series of spires and antennas. Several doors had been cut into the outer buildings' walls by the inquiring Earthmen. Originally, the walls had been perfectly blank.

"Did you bring a torch?" Lee asked.

Elaine shook her head. "Don't need one anymore. We installed lights inside. They're tripped by a photocell as we cross through a doorway."

He could feel it coming on as they approached the buildings—the tenseness, the prickling along the spine, as if a deeply-buried memory was writhing within his mind.

Even before they entered the doorway he could sense the throbbing, beating *purposefulness* of the machines.

And then they were inside, surrounded by them, row on row, tier on tier, inhuman untiring infallible machines humming, growling, whining, filling the vast building with the rumbling power of their work. Driving, constantly driving at their un-

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known tasks. Along catwalks that snaked through the maze of machines, automatic maintenance vehicles scurried along, stopping here for a quick adjustment, there for replacement of a faulty part.

No matter where the two invading humans went along the twining catwalks, the maintenance vehicles avoided them. If they stopped before a machine that was to be serviced, the maintenance vehicle would hover nearby, glowering at them, waiting for them to get out of the way.

HE could feel it again—the alienness, the lurking presence of an intelligence that scorned the intruders from Earth. Every nerve in his body screamed the same message: get out, get away, this thing is evil, hostile, a weapon against all mankind. In the conference room, telling them of his theory, he had inwardly wondered how much of it he himself really believed. But here, in the midst of these implacably efficient machines—he *knew*. This is the product of a cosmic hatred, the work of those who seek to destroy man, our ancient enemy, the unknown, the nameless Others.

"Are you all right?"

Elaine's voice in his earphones snapped him back to reality.

"Why, do I look green?"

She came up close enough so that their helmets nearly touched. "A little green," she said, smiling. "It gives me the creeps, too. Want to go?"

"No," he answered. "Let's see the work that's going on."

He took a firm grip on himself and went through it all, from the combined crews of archeologists and engineers tracing wiring circuits, to the handful of physicists conducting further tests on the power generator buried deep in the central building's foundation.

"It goes awfully slowly," Elaine said as they trudged back to the center.

"We're on the outside looking in," Lee said. "If we could only determine the *purpose* of the machinery, then the rest of it would come pretty easily."

They returned to the surface bubble and took off their pressure suits.

"Nearly dinner time," Elaine said, as they descended to the living area "How about eating in my quarters?" she asked.

"Can you cook?"

"You'll find out."

A FEW hours later, he had decided that she definitely could cook, and that she had somehow managed to bring to Titan some of the best wine he had tasted in years.

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Now the table was folded back into the wall, and they were sitting together on the couch, listening to music tapes.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Villa-Lobos, a Twentieth Century composer. *Bachianas Brazilieris.* Number eight, I think . . ."

They listened in silence for a few moments to the moody, restless music.

"Reminds me of topside, standing at the shore of the ammonia sea when a storm is coming up," he said.

Elaine nodded. "Yes . . . the wind, and the dark, and the waves . . ."

Abruptly, the music snapped off.

"Oh damn!" Elaine blurted. "I thought I had the thing fixed."

"Let me take a look at it," Lee said getting up from the couch.

He tinkered with the recorder for a while, to no avail. "I'm no electronics tech, that's for sure."

Elaine shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I'll have it repaired tomorrow."

She went into the kitchenette and called back, "How about some brandy?"

"Fine," he answered.

She returned and handed him a glass.

"Ad astra," he said, as they touched glasses.

"Amen."

Elaine walked slowly away from him, swishing the liquor in her glass. "Let's go topside and see the stars," she said, suddenly.

"H'mm?"

"Up to the bubble. Come on."

So they left her one-room quarters and took the lift tube up to the bubble. It was deserted. Overhead, Saturn was low on the horizon, silhouetting the alien buildings. They turned to the other side of the sky, where it was clear and dark. Thousands of stars twinkled in the darkness; they made out Sirius and Vega, then Mars, and finally Earth—a bright blue jewel that outshone all the others.

"I guess Jupiter's on the other side of the Sun," Lee said.

Elaine nodded. "It looks so far away," she said, staring at Earth, "and so lonely, out there in all that emptiness."

"A psychotech would call that 'projection.'"

"I know. We're the lonely ones, aren't we?"

She was perfectly serious now.

"You know that Ruth and I have split up," he said.

"I heard . . . that she left you."

He shrugged. "That's a matter of viewpoint. She got tired sitting Earthside while I batted around the Solar System. When I told her I was going to Vega, she called it quits."

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"Couldn't she have gone with you?"

"If she had wanted to . . ."

"Do you still love her?" Elaine asked.

"I don't know. I don't think I know what love really is, anymore. All I know is . . . on that long trip out to Vega, when I had nothing to do but sit and think, it wasn't Ruth I was thinking about. It was you."

"Oh . . ."

They talked a bit more, and finally he took her in his arms and kissed her and she was his, at least for a little while.

WEEKS lapsed into months, and the work on Titan inched steadily along. If he stopped to think about it, Lee knew that all they were doing was scratching around the base of the problem, and making precious little headway. *The blind men and the elephant,* he told himself. But then he asked himself what else they could possibly do, and the answer was always, nothing. But the machine was still there, doing whatever it was designed to do, and he could sense the scornful laughter of its creators as he vainly tried to understand their work. Only the thought of Elaine, the sight of her, the touch of her, allowed him to keep his sense of balance.

People left Titan, baffled and confused; new people arrived—eager, full of energy, excited at the chance to tackle the unknown, undimmed—at first—by the day-to-day frustrations of trying to unlock a door that has no key.

* * *

Lee dialed his selection at the robocafeteria and waited a few moments for the tray of food to appear at the pickup table. He had spent the morning shut away in his office, searching months worth of reports for some glimmer of encouragement. There was progress, of course; there was always progress. But it was never in a direction that would take them closer to the final answer.

And, carefully tucked into the top drawer of his desk was a nasty yellow sheet that bore a querulous message from Earth: What is the status of the project? Why are expenditures constantly climbing? Is a ninety-three-man staff really needed? When can some solid results be expected?

Lee picked an unoccupied table and sat down. As he started to eat, a quartet of young engineers, headed by Dr. Kurtzman, came in and sat at the next table.

"I still don't see why they keep digging," one of them was saying. "They'll never find anything outside the buildings."

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Another countered, "Look, they've got to follow every possible angle. The only way we're ever going to understand this thing is to put together every scrap of evidence we can find until there's enough to form an understandable picture."

Kurtzman shook his head. "Not at all. This isn't going to be solved by putting pieces together, like a puzzle. There's more evidence in those buildings than we can ever hope to digest. It's not a matter of adding up clues . . . this is going to be a *gestalt*. One of these days, somebody's going to get a few thousand million of his brain cells turned the right way, and he'll say, "Ah-HAH!" Then we'll have it. Until then, it's our job to keep poking around, hoping to find the right piece of information to trigger the *gestalt*."

The first one spluttered. "But that . . . that's non-scientific!"

"So?" Kurtzman asked, arching his eyebrows. "Do you see science making any great strides around here? We're in over our heads. Intuition is the only thing that can save us."

"If we're that bad off, we might as well quit," the first one said. "In fact, that might be the best idea of all. Forget it and go home. Let the damned machine run for another million years, if it wants to."

Lee could not keep quiet any longer. "That would be fine, wouldn't it?" he said, turning on the surprised engineer. "Give it up and forget about it, without knowing where it came from, or what it's doing, or why."

"I didn't mean . . ."

"Listen to me. It's not just that the thing could be a weapon. It may not be. But we don't know. And as long as we don't know, we've got to keep trying to find out. Understand?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"And there's more at stake here than just an intellectual puzzle," Lee insisted. "If we turn our backs on this machine, we've turned our backs on a basic premise of all scientific thought. If we admit that we can't understand this machine, then we admit that there's an absolute limit to our ability to understand the universe. We give in to the old witch-doctor's claim that there are some things in the world that man must not tamper with. Taboo!

"The basic nature of man and science is at stake here! We've got to understand that machine. Our claim to the stars is tied up in it."

Lee looked up and saw that everyone in the dining hall was watching him. He stood up.

"Sorry; I didn't mean to get so vehement," he mumbled to the engineer. "Guess I'm a bit edgy today."

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He walked quickly out of the dining area and returned to his office.

SLOWLY, quietly, the work went on. Dr. Petchkovich spent six weeks on Mercury, supervising at first hand the investigation of the area where the machine's antennas were focused. He returned to Titan in high excitement.

"We have definitely proved that there is a disturbance in the interplanetary magnetic field at the focal point of the machine's antennas," he announced to the department heads, when they convened in the conference room to hear his report.

"How strong a disturbance?" Dr. Kulaki asked.

Petchkovich hesitated a moment. "Well, it's only one part in a hundred thousand . . ."

The excitement died quickly. It was a discovery, yes. But it did not bring them any closer to understanding the machine and its purpose.

* * *

Lee was sitting at his desk, staring moodily at a graph that Dr. Childe had left with him: the results of the Orbital Computing Center's extrapolation of the wave patterns broadcast by the machine.

The phone buzzer sounded. Without taking his eyes from the graph, Lee flicked the phone on.

"Are you busy right now?"

He looked up and saw Elaine's face on the screen. "No, not really," he answered. "Come on in."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

As soon as she came through the door he knew that something was wrong. She was trying too hard not to look concerned.

"What's up?" he asked her.

She shrugged and sat down in front of the desk. "I just thought we might talk for a while."

"In my office?"

"It concerns official business."

"I see."

She looked at the graph. "What's that? Something new?"

Changing the subject, he thought to himself. *What's she afraid of?*

Aloud, he answered, "It's Childe's results from the Big Brain . . . the machine's wave patterns extrapolated over a million years." He turned the graph around so she could see it better.

Elaine studied it for a moment, then shook her head. "Childe was right, wasn't he? It doesn't make any sense at all. No pattern, no rhyme, no reason."

"I don't know," Lee said. "There's something . . . well, something strange about these waves. They don't follow a regular pattern, and yet . . ."

"What?"

He frowned. "They're just too damned irregular to be really

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random. That doesn't make much sense, does it? Well, anyway, I've got the feeling that I've seen this pattern—or lack of pattern—before. Somewhere I've seen something that looks a lot like this . . . but I can't remember where."

Elaine looked at the graph again, at the multiple curves swinging back and forth across the paper, intertwining in seeming confusion. "It looks like some of the graphs I drew when I was an undergrad."

He laughed. "Maybe that's where I saw it."

There was an awkward silence. Lee got up from his seat and walked around the desk. He pulled up another chair and sat beside Elaine. "Now, what's the trouble?"

"I've been thinking," she said slowly. "I . . . I've decided to transfer off Titan."

"Leave? But why?"

"For us, Sid. For both of us. Before we get so wrapped up in each other that we won't be able to break it up without really getting hurt . . ."

"I don't understand," he said.

She spoke calmly and softly, no tears, no hysterics. She had thought it all out very carefully. "Sid, take a look around you. We're like two castaways on a desert world. We love each other —here and now. But we won't always be here. What happens when we leave Titan? What happens when we're not faced with the loneliness and that . . . that *thing* out there? Suppose we find that we don't really need each other? What then?"

"But I do need you, Elaine. I love you."

"You do now," she answered. "But how long will it last? Sid, I have to get away, at least for a little while. I need a sense of perspective."

"I see," he said, shifting his gaze away from her. "That doesn't leave me much to say, does it? All right, Elaine. Make out a transfer request and I'll sign it."

"Thanks. I . . . I hope you understand." She got up and started slowly toward the door.

"I'm not so sure that you understand this yourself," he replied. "But I know this—I don't want to lose you, Elaine. If you haven't worked this out within a month or so after you leave Titan, I'll come looking for you."

She turned and, without a word, went over and kissed him. Then she quickly left the office.

Lee returned to his desk. He sat down and stared at Childe's graph again. After a few minutes, he angrily slapped it in a drawer, slammed the thing shut, and stamped out of the room.

PERSONAL matters were soon buried in the excitement of another discovery, this time an

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important one. It looked promising.

Kurtzman and Kulaki finally discovered what form of energy the antennas were beaming out.

After years of trial-and-error experimentation, the engineer and electronicist asked Richards and Childe to lend a hand. With a firm theoretical and mathematical background to bolster their work, Kurtzman and Kulaki started out on a process of elimination.

They soon proved that the antennas were not broadcasting any known form of electromagnetic energy, from gamma to long-radio waves. They investigated one possibility after another, turning up a steady succession of negative answers. Negative, but answers all the same, It was time-consuming, but at least they were definitely determining which avenues were blind alleys.

Then Childe started tinkering with a hunch, and showed his paperwork to Richards. The two of them made a few suggestions to Kurtzman and Kulaki. Their problem was that their detection instruments were drawing blanks, when applied to the antennas' output. But the power input to the antennas showed they were working continuously.

Childe showed, mathematically, that their output must be an extremely weak, low-frequency form of energy. Richards agreed, and pointed out that there was only one known form of energy that fulfilled these conditions: gravity.

"Gravity waves?" Kurtzman asked, incredulously, when they told him about it.

Kulaki's mind reacted faster. "Knowing it's gravity waves, on paper, and proving it experimentally are two different things."

But they were up to the test. They had to scavange equipment from the center's grav screen machinery, and the whole underground community was without its Earth-normal grav field for two and a half days, but when the field was returned to normal (and people stopped hopping and bouncing all through the center) Kurtzman and Kulaki had proved that the antennas were indeed beaming out gravity waves.

It's all here, Lee thought, as he read their combined report. *Now we know what the machine is doing. But to what purpose? What influence does this have on Earth?*

Then he put down the report and turned to another bit of paperwork that lay on his desk: Elaine's official request for a transfer. He looked through it automatically. There was a place marked *Justification for Request.* Elaine had typed simply, "Personal." Lee flipped to the last page and signed.

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He leaned back in his chair and tried to let his mind float free; forget about her, forget about the buildings out there, forget about everything . . . at least for a few moments. Just drift and let your mind wander where it pleases . . .

THE automatic secretary on his desk hummed into life and announced, "Department heads' meeting starts in five minutes."

To hell with the department heads. To hell with Titan. A world of cold and dark and ice. Like Dante's Inferno. Titan is hell. A place where sinning scientists are sent. Their punishment is to stand out in the cold and try to solve the unanswerable. Forever. Stand in the icy darkness and try to understand the unknown. Once in a while you make a discovery that excites you; but when you look again, your discovery is meaningless, you know as little about the real answer as you knew before. The discoveries are just part of the punishment, part of the eternal torment, they just keep you going after the carrot on the stick, but the carrot is always out of reach . . .

"Department heads' meeting beginning now," the automatic voice said.

Lee cocked an eye at the tiny device. "All right," he said, getting up, "I'm going."

The meeting was strictly routine. The reaction had set in. A week ago they had all been agog with the gravity-waves discovery. Now it had become apparent that the discovery had not opened the door they were trying to get through. *We're like children,* Lee thought, *trying to put together a stereo transceiver from an assembly kit; all the pieces are there, but we can't get them together in the proper way.*

It was a short meeting. As they broke up, Lee saw Richards walk over to Elaine.

"I hear you're leaving us," the young physicist said. "Going Earthside?"

"Yes," Elaine answered. "For a while, at least."

Richards broke into his feline grin again. "Good. I'll be vacationing on Earth in a few weeks. Do you like to ski?"

"I haven't skied in years . . ."

"There's a lodge I go to in Switzerland. Really fine. And the skiing is marvelous. Even if you don't want to ski, there are mountains to climb . . . and glaciers . . ."

Lee started toward them, thought better of it, and walked sullenly out of the room. He went to his office, sat fidgeting at his desk for a while, then called her on the intercom. She was not at her office or her quarters, so the equipment automatically paged her. When her face finally

(*Concluded on page* 101)

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Who knows the secret of survival after the day of the big Blast? Who really are . . .

THE SMART ONES

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrated by SCHELLING

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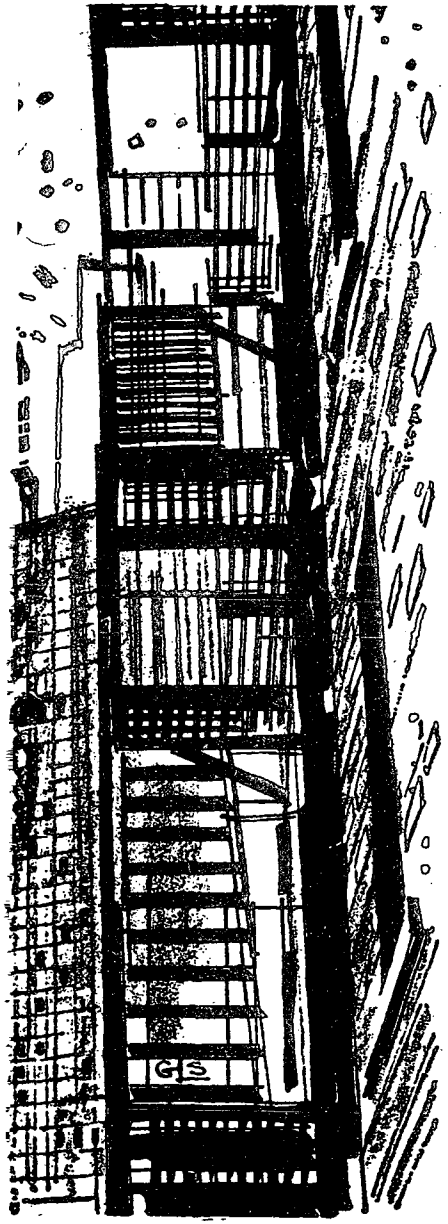

THE first inkling came in a news bulletin that interrupted all regularly scheduled programming on the networks. Russia had uttered a flat or-else at the UN assembly, and the U.S. had countered with a steely just-try-it. That was all. It might be bad, it might not be so bad. Par-for-the-course or This-is-it. The bulletin lasted forty seconds, then regular programming was resumed. No warnings, no repeats of the Conelrad band-numbers, no stay-tuned urgings. Just the bulletin, then resumption of routine telecasts.

Pete Crolin turned to his wife, Beth. "What do you think?" he said, not having to specify his meaning further. A faint frown deepened the soft lines of her forehead.

'I don't know,' she said, *thoughtfully*. "I *think* I'll call Lucille, see what she and Corey think."

Her husband nodded, then lifted his beer and sipped it slowly, savoring the taste as though he might not have the chance again, his eyes returning to—but no longer witnessing—the western which the bulletin had interrupted. Beth rose from her chair, smoothed her dress, then made her way to the phone. Lucille's was a number Beth called at least once every day, but she had to look it up after dialling two wrong numbers.

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"Corey thinks so, too," her friend said, when Beth had told the reason for her call. "He's out checking the shelter. We've got plenty of water and food, but he thinks we need more books, just in case."

"I wonder why we think this is it," Beth mused. "We both felt it, and I guess you and Corey did, too. It's like that last straw on the camel's back. That kind of feeling."

Lucille, however, was in no mood for philosophizing. "Corey's coming in, honey. I've got to help him with the books. I'll call back later—" She gave a funny, short laugh. "If there is a later." Lucille hung up.

PETE had finished his beer, and was standing beside the silent TV, staring at the wall, when she returned. Beth took him by the arm, and he turned to face in her direction without resistance. "Pete," she said, then louder, "Pete!" Some of the far-awayness cleared from his eyes, and he saw her.

"Oh. What'd Lucille have to say?"

Beth gave a funny kind of smile and a half-shrug.

Pete nodded. "Them, too. I guess I knew they'd feel it. Everybody will. I wonder how long we've got."

His wife gripped his upper arms, hard. "Listen," she said. "It's not too late, yet. Lucille and Corey have told us a dozen times to come in with them if things started blowing up. There's room. I have plenty of food, so we won't infringe on theirs. Let's go over there, now. Just— Just in case."

Pete wrenched away from her and shook his head violently. "*No!* I've told you, over and over. I'm not going to prolong things. If the world blows itself up, I don't want to hang around for a few extra weks to die in the wreckage of thirst or starvation. I'd as soon go when the world goes." Then his manner softened, and he took her gently by the shoulders. "But, honey— If *you* want to go with them, it's okay. I'll understand. Let me help you pack the car, and—"

Beth's hand came up in a blurred arc and cracked stingingly against the side of Pete's face. "*Stop it!*" she cried. "Stop talking that way! You know I won't go without you. What's left if your gone!?" Pete had to grip her wrists to stop the frantic tiny fists that pummeled his chest in angry affection.

"Okay, okay, honey. I won't say it again. We'll stay here, together." He started to take her in his arms, then suddenly grinned and started turning her around to face the other way. "In fact, we'll have a party!" he

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said, shoving her kitchenward. "Open that bottle of wine we've been saving for Thanksgiving dinner. We'll have it, tonight, along with maybe some of that anchovy paste we bought and never tried, and—"

"There's some cold chicken in the refrigerator," said his wife, catching his infectuous enthusiasm. "And I think some onion dip, and corn crisps—"

The peal of the front doorbell stopped them in the hall. "Lucille?" Pete asked his wife. Blankly, she shrugged, then crossed the short foyer and opened the door. A young man in uniform burst in, his cap pushed crazily back on his short-cropped hair. "Pete— Beth— Listen!" he said. "Did you hear the news bulletin?"

"Martin . . ." Pete said, shaken. "Why aren't you at the base?" Martin Fenelly was a neighbor, a Space Reservist.

"Dorothea's out in the car. We're headed there now. Come with us, please!" begged the young officer.

"Something *is* going to happen, then!" said Beth.

"You bet your boots," said Martin. "Riots are starting all over the world. London, Chicago, Cairo . . . Anyplace with public shelters. People are trampling one another to get in."

"But the newscasters didn't say—" started Pete, simultaneously with Beth's halting, "Conelrad isn't on the air . . ."

"Conelrad!" spat young Fenelly. "They don't dare use it. If they did, the panics would grow. Right now, there's still a chance of keeping some order. One warning to the populace, and the country becomes a mob, two hundred million strong!"

"Pete—!" Beth turned to stare up into his face. "What should we do?"

Pete licked dry lips, then looked shrewdly at Fenelly. "What's at the base? Shelters?"

"A ship," said Martin. "A spaceship. Never been tried, or fully tested, but it's about the only real chance anyone has. I'm going, so's Dorothea, and three of my crewmen. The others are swiping jets to fly to their homes. They want to be with their families when hell breaks loose."

"But where's it flying to? Where can you go?"

"Moonbase," said Martin. "There's plenty of room, all the synthetic foods a person needs, oxygen-generators, water-recapturing systems. It's the nearest safe spot, as of that blowup at the UN today."

BETH turned a hopeful gaze to Pete. "*Should* we, darling? It's not like a shelter, like you were worried about. We don't have to come out and look for

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food in the rubble. We can live indefinitely on Moonbase. Please, darling! Please?"

"I've got to think," said Pete, blinking. "It never ocurred to me I'd have a third choice. I was resigned to sitting and waiting for the blast. Now— I'm all mixed up."

"It's *life* Martin's offering us!" pleaded Beth. "You can't turn down an offer of life, real survival!"

"But— But *is* it?!" asked Pete, uncertainly. "We can't leave Moonbase any more than we could leave Corey's shelter. What difference if we're buried alive to avoid radiaton or freezing vacuum?"

"Pete, *please!*" said Beth, almost screaming.

"Damn it, Pete, make up your mind!" snapped Martin. "I can't wait another minute. My wife's out in the car; she's trusting me to take her to safety!"

"I— I won't go! Maybe I'm wrong, but I just don't want to leave. If I had time to think—"

"All *right!*" said Martin, starting for the door, angrily. "Try to do a favor, risk your own life, and—" Then he relented and rushed back to his neighbor. "Good luck, Pete," he said, gripping the older man's hand tightly. "Goodbye, Beth."

"No! No, wait!" said Beth Crolin, not daring to look at her husband's face as she rushed after the young man. "*I'll* come with you!" Pete just stood like carven stone, watching, as Beth hurried down the front path into the night toward the waiting car. Martin, sick with embarrassment, turned a wryly apologetic grin Pete's way before following after her.

When the sound of the engine faded in the distance, Pete finally managed to move, and closed the door on the cold night outside. He went to the kitchen, stared hard at the bottle of wine in its corner of the pantry shelf, then yanked it down and smashed it to glittering bits in the sink.

* * *

"Corey," complained Lucille, "you *know* you're not going to read *Vanity Fair* or *Coningsby*. You've started them a hundred times, and always lost interest. We could use the space for a hundred better things."

Corey shoved the books doggedly back into the slot from which his wife had taken them on the bookshelf, and set his back stubbornly against them, glaring at her. "Those are records," he said, fighting an urge to shout. "The society of Thackeray's time, the British school system of Disraeli's. Some day our children will want to know what the world was like before the disaster."

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"Why?" said his wife. "What they don't know won't hurt them. They'll never wonder about it if you don't prod them to. And why should they know about *Vanity Fair* and *Coningsby* anyhow? *You've* survived this long without knowing!"

"All right, all right!' snarled Corey, whirling to the shelf, and pulling books out by the handful. "Fill the space with Wheaties, or movie magazines! Or home permanents and lipstick! To hell with our children's minds!"

"Corey, stop it!" hollered Lucille, trying to pick the books from the shelter floor as he hurled them there, then giving up and simply trying to pin his flailing arms. His elbow struck her in the chest, and she fell back with a startled grunt. Corey, his face white, started toward her with words of remorse on his lips, then tripped ingloriously upon the heaped volumes and sprawled on his face at her feet.

Lucille sank into a chair as he rose groggily on hands and knees, and began to laugh. Corey, after a second, began to match her laughter with his own. Then he frowned and stopped. Her laughter was all wrong. He took her by the shoulders and shook her, but she kept on laughing while the tears ran down her contorted face.

YOU should have *told* me!" moaned Martin, on his knees beside the metal-and-nylon cot. Dorothea just groaned and tossed her head from side to side on the sweat-soaked pillow, fighting the restraining straps. "S— Surprise," she mumbled, her features white with agony. "I w-wanted it to be a surprise."

"But—" her husband sobbed, beating his firsts futilely against the steel bulkhead, "didn't you know the takeoff would be like that? Haven't I told you how many grown men had died of internal hemorrhages from the gravities they had to resist during takeoff? Didn't you suspect that you—!?"

He stopped, and sagged, his head resting against the frame of her bunk, and just sobbed softly, uselessly, while his wife murmured, over and over, like a fragment of intolerably sad music, "My baby, my little baby, my poor baby . . ."

* * *

Pete sat in a thick, muddling fog, his fingers fumbling with paper and glue, sniffling softly in his misery. He didn't hear the light footsteps on the porch, nor the familiar voice, until his name was called for the third time. Then he started, guiltily, and began to try and hide what he held clumsily on his lap.

Beth came into their bedroom

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and saw him, and what he was trying to do. The empty beer cans, the shattered glass upon the carpeted floor, and the ragred tear in the wallpaper between bureau and closet told her what he'd done. "I don't blame you," she said softly, cupping her hand gently about the back of his neck. Pete suddenly choked on his tears and flung his arms about her thighs, burying his face hard against her abdomen.

"I was so mad— so mad at you," he said between spasms of relieved weeping. "I came up here, drinking, saw the wedding picture on the wall— s-smashed the glass, and—"

Beth looked at the wedding photo where it had fallen in two curling halves upon the floor, and smiled. "But you tried to fix it again," she said softly.

"Of *course* I tried to fix it!" he muttered, keeping his face close against the warm softness of her belly. "I got mad, but I got over it."

"Me, too," said Beth. "A mile from the house, I screamed for Martin to let me out of the car. I had to walk back. No one's bothering to run the busses anymore. I— I saw the wine, in the sink. Is there any beer left?"

He nodded, mutely, still holding her tightly.

"Then we can still have our party," she said decisively. "Maybe not so fancy as we'd planned, but—"

Then her husband was surging to his feet and stilling her lips with the hungry pressure of his own.

HOURS before the spaceship reached Moonbase, the men stationed there saw the horror begin. The orb of Earth, silver and blue against the black void of space, began to erupt with tiny bubbles of orange-and-white, faster and faster, until the shapes of the continents were limned against the steady blue glow of the oceans. Then the fringe of the oceans began to billow white rolling clouds of steam, and the planet shrouded itself in impenetrable heaving seas of angry white vapor.

Some common tacit urging made the men continue with their jobs there, go through the routine of scanning the universe, radioing reports to stations long since molten piles of slag, metering the water and precious oxygen that kept them alive. No one wanted to talk of what they'd seen; life went on for many hours as though nothing untoward had happened. Then, when the last strained thread of control was fraying madly—

The spaceship landed, with its five-person complement.

"More mouths to feed," said

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the Moonbase commander, looking out through the port at the spacesuited figures moving clumsily toward the airlock. "I don't know if we should let them in. Even if it's the President, I don't know."

"Sir," said an aide, "Look there, in the lead. The small one, leaning on the arm of another one. I think it's a woman."

The commander's eyes hooded for a moment, then he turned to his aide and said, "Let her in."

"Before the others, you mean, sir?" asked the man.

"Let *her* in. Period."

"S-sir . . ." said the aide, his voice shaking. "You're not thinking of—"

"We've been here for three months without a woman, Captain," said the commander. "This may be the last one alive in the cosmos. I'm not sure the man with her would agree to sharing her."

"But the others—They can't live out there for more than a few hours in their spacesuits . . ."

But the commander had picked up a book of crossword puzzles, and was concentrating fiercely on a cryptogram. The other man swallowed noisily, once, then went to carry out the orders.

* * *

"It's over," said Corey to his wife. Lucille nodded dully. "Don't you understand, honey? The bombing's stopped, and we're still alive. Enough food for months. The radiation-count will be down by then, and—"

"And what?" asked Lucille, staring from her husband's face to the two children sleeping on the military cot before the crowded bookshelf. "When it's down, what happens next?"

"Why— We go out. We rebuild."

"Rebuild? Rebuild what? How?" said Lucille. "Can you build a radio? If you could, who would we talk to, listen to?"

"I mean, rebuild houses, start farming, raise animals . . ."

"Will the land grow food any more? Are there animals left out there, or did they forget to burrow underground when the fires began?" said Lucille.

"Be reasonable, honey!" said Corey.

"That's what I'm being, for the first time in years," she said. "I wish we'd stayed with Pete and Beth."

"They've turned to ashes by now," said Corey.

Lucille shrugged. "Maybe they're better off." The baby began to cry, and kick its round pink legs.

"I think the baby needs a change, or something," said Corey, looking down at his infant son.

"Read him *Coningsby*," said

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Lucille. Then she started laughing again, until Corey was forced to slap her face crimson to quiet her.

JUST a few weeks short of two years after the holocaust, the great spaceship settled on faltering fires to the charred surface of the Earth. The Moonbase commander, gaunt from long starvation, reeled out into the glaring white sunlight, fell face downward upon the sharp black rocks, and just lay there, trying to catch his breath. Behind him, a pale shadow formed in the blackness of the open airlock, and a woman crept out, her hair tangled and white-streaked, her face raddled with disease. She shuddered, and sank to a squatting position on the ground, covering her face with her hands to block out the horrible vista that ran for mile upon scorched mile.

"It's dead, the world's dead," she mewled, quaking. "We're at a wake, a hideous, horrible wake!"

The commander groaned and lifted himself up painfully on his elbows. "There's got to be something, somewhere, or we've had it."

"It's your fault," said the woman. "What did you expect the men to do when you kept me to yourself! You shared me with them nearly two years. You shouldn't have locked the men out of your quarters."

"I was drunk!" the commander said bitterly. "I didn't think they'd go berserk—wreck the synthesizers—fight among themselves—"

"I had a husband, once," said the woman. "You let him freeze to death, suffocate, all because he would have wanted to keep me for himself. You turned around and did the same thing." Musingly, she eyed a large jagged stone, lifted it in her hand, and approached the weary, sprawling form on the ground. "If he deserved to die, why not you?"

"That was different," said the commander. "I'd have shared you when I sobered up. He'd never—" He hadn't time for even a gasp as the woman brought the stone down with both hands upon the nape of his neck, shattering the bone beneath the thin flesh there. He fell forward, drooling blood on the sun-baked black rock.

"No," said the woman, brushing her hands firmly against her thighs to cleanse them of the feel of the rock. "Martin would never. That's why I loved him."

Tiredly, she began to walk, away from the ship and the memories of degradation it held for her, out across the hot, blazing plains of arid rock, humming a lilting waltz that had been played at her highschool prom.

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When she could walk no further, she lay down on the rock, rolled onto her back, and smiled emptily at the stark blue skies overhead until unconsciousness stole over her.

A HUNDRED miles away, a naked boy knelt before a cairn of rock, frowning in concentration, his tongue tucked against the corner of his mouth as he carefully arranged smooth red pebbles before the cairn until their design pleased him. Under the cairn lay a steel-and-concrete door, and within the chamber beyond it lay the mummified bodies of his parents and siblings, as he'd found them when he was old enough to crawl. He was walking now, pretty well for his fifteen months of life. He could only judge his progress by the progress of others like him, children conceived amid the radiation and gene-mutating chaos of those first months in the shelters.

He'd determined to be a leader. He didn't know the word "leader", of course, but he would soon coin a sound that conveyed that meaning to himself and the others. He didn't know why his parents were dead, or the parents of the others like himself. Perhaps one always died when one reached a certain age. Still, why had his brother and sister died, then, since they had so much growing to do before they matched that of his parents?

He shrugged away the problem, finished his arrangement of colored stones, and stood up to consider them. They would do nicely, he decided. They would prettify the spot where his ancestry lay buried, here amid the rocky splendors of such a lovely, incredibly beautiful planet.

He scowled, suddenly, deciding that the pattern of stones held one red rock too many. Carefully, he removed it.

He sent a short series of affectionate thoughts toward the departed souls of his family, then turned away from the cairn and began to toddle across the burning black rock toward the area housing the shelters of the other children. He was tired of mourning for the day. Besides, the other kids were considering building a structure to keep off the infrequent hot rains, and he thought he knew a way to support the roof which no one else had yet considered.

Thinking hard as he moved toward the community area, he tossed the colored pebble up and down absently in one hand, then popped it into his mouth and chewed it up with relish. It was only an appetizer. For dinner, at sunset, he had his eye on a rainbow outcropping of quartz. It should be delicious.

THE END

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Out near the edge of the Solar System, — the spacesuit shot an arrow into the non-air. With repur- cussions, as follows.

FOR EVERY ACTION...

By C. C. MacApp

Illustrated by ADKINS

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Date: 5 June 1987.
To: Commandant, USSR Hq., Mars. (Personal).
From: Commandant, USSR Pluto expedition.
Code: TS Perishka C.
Subject: Mad American Spaceman.

Wofka: I am taking the precaution of sending this to you personally, because of the obvious possible booby-traps. Perhaps discreet espionage on Mars or Earth will reveal what sort of shell-game the Americans are up to now, before we involve ourselves in some propaganda debacle.

Twelve hours ago radar picked up a small object in space, moving in an orbit that would intercept us fairly closely but at a slightly lower speed. Knowing that an American ship was already near Pluto, and that they surely knew *we* were approaching, I at once placed my ship in a state of maximum defense. However, closer approach revealed the object to be not a mine or torpedo, but a space suit with a number of objects attached to it. Of course the suit or other objects *could* have contained explosives, so I maintained caution.

When we were quite close we picked up a weak radio transmission in English that appeared to be beamed not at us but in the opposite direction. If it was in code we have been unable to break it. Our interpreter, whom possibly we had better investigate again, could tell us only that the voice, a male one, was reciting some sort of nursery rhyme called Mother Goose. The recitation was monotonous and repetitive.

Shortly thereafter telescopic examination revealed the following:

1—space suit, evidently occupied.
2—tanks of approximately 300 litre capacity, fixed to the suit by short rigid rods.
4—bundles, approximately half a meter cubed, lashed to the legs of the suit.
1—cylindrical container, approximately three metres long by zero point seven metres diameter, fixed between the legs of the suit in such a way that the occupant appeared to be riding as you would ride a horse.
1—large bow, with which the occupant of the suit fired or shot arrows in a direction normal to the orbit of Pluto (that is, away from us) at intervals of eight seconds.

The arrows came from the long cylinder he was riding.

UPON discovering our approach the occupant of the suit stopped shooting arrows and

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said in English, "If you can still hear me, fellows, I've found Ivan." (His knowing my first name is significant!). He repeated the transmission several times, then waited with apparent calm for us to pick him up.

Upon examination of his equipment, we found no explosives. The small bundles contained batteries to keep the suit operating. One of the 300-litre tanks was about half full of gruel; the other about half full of body wastes. The gruel was made accessible to the spaceman by a plastic tube which had been sealed through his helmet at the front, so he could draw upon it merely by putting his mouth on the tube and sucking. The removal of body waste was accomplished by a similar but more permanent arrangement which was surprisingly effective, though an obvious indignity and by his testimony uncomfortable. The suit's maintenance machinery was in good working order, and the air inside was breathable though not as sweet as one might prefer. The long cylindrical tank was about one-third full of arrows, the rest having been expended. The arrows were cut from steel (evidently the hull plates of a ship) by means of a hack saw or some similar implement. The bow was of springy metal and the string of braided fine wire. Both were alloys that held their flexibility in the cold of space.

Quite obviously the shooting of arrows had provided reaction to slow the spaceman's orbit to a speed where we would overtake him. Nevertheless the calculation and execution of such a maneuver would be difficult to the point of unbelievability. The man's story is that he was reciting 'The House That Jack Built' as a sort of mnemonic to maintain the proper rate of fire, and that the arrows averaged out to a chosen weight and the bow delivered consistent reaction when drawn to a certain point. He sticks to this story through all interrogation, and says he was sent to ask us to rescue his comrades, who are (he says) floating in a small portion of their ship in an orbit dangerously close to Pluto. Of course I do not swallow his story. Nevertheless I do not see any harm in cautiously approaching a little closer to investigate. I am confident we can handle any trickery the Americans may have in mind.

The entirety of his statement is so ridiculous that I will not attempt to abstract it, but will attach it in full. I'm sure you will exercise caution equal to mine in sending this to you personally. Old comrades must stick together.

Signed, Ivan Dzbrown,
commanding.

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Statement of mad American spaceman:

Hi. No, I don't speak Russian. I know a few words of Basque, though, from my mother's side, if that'll help any. Oh, you speak English! Jeez, you speak it real good. You say you were born in Massachusetts? Nice place. I was there a while when I took my Ph.D.

Well, here's the scoop. I guess you heard about us making up our minds to get to Pluto first. It only cost us four hundred billion bucks, ha, ha! You should have heard old ex-President Johnson yell. Well, anyway, we made it off Mars in real good shape, and we were latching onto Pluto good too, but then we noticed the jets weren't working right, and after a computer check and all we decided somebody better go outside and take a squint. I got picked because I've got the most experience in suits. That's why I'm here, too.

Well, right away when I got aft I could see that there was something stuck around the jets; it looked like cinders at first. When I got closer I saw that it was more like as if some grapes, the black kind, were clustered around the orifices. While I was bent down looking, something came along and gave me a hell of a whang on the butt. Right away I thought Jeez, a meteor; but it didn't penetrate the suit and I was all right. Then I began to see more of them coming and I hauled on my line and got away from the jets because that was where they were all headed. I talked to the skipper and he told me to stay out there and watch if I wasn't in any danger.

They were coming from all directions and collecting around the jets like a swarm of bees. But they were not coming as thick, and pretty soon they stopped coming entirely. Then after a while some of them began to go away. They didn't all go, though, and enough of them were still around the jets to goof up the action. Once in a while a single one or two would break off and go away, and maybe a couple more would drift in and gather on.

I took one of the tools that we have on the suits, I guess probably you people have got the same kind of thing, and hacked away at them but they were on tight. The only ones I could get loose seemed to be the ones that were letting go anyway.

WELL I got hold of one and let it go right away because I could feel it sort of squirm, even through the mitten, but it wasn't actually squirming as I found out when I let it go. It was shaped like maybe two-thirds of a marble, one about five-eighths

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of an inch in diameter. I guess maybe you people work in millimetres, and your kids don't get to play marbles, huh? Let's see . . . two hundred and fifty-four times six hundred and twenty-five is . . . carry the two . . . where the hell would I put the decimal place . . . say, like a dull black iron ball-bearing about fifteen point eight seven five millimetres in diameter, with one-third of it sawed off flat. A blue light came off of this flat side and it gave the thing quite a boost of acceleration and that was what I felt. I was worried at first that it was some kind of an ion drive that would burn a hole in my hand or the suit, but it didn't do anything like that. I watched a few more and I saw that they could turn themselves any way they wanted to by giving out a faint glow on one edge of the flat place, then when they wanted to light out and go they just turned it all on. We did some fooling around with them later and found out they could exert about—but there's no sense going into all that now. We've got the figures in the ship, or what's left of it; and hell, the least we can do after you rescue us is let you in on them. Scientific cooperation, ha, ha!

Well I took a chance because I was pretty excited and the next one that drifted in I grabbed it and held it so the blue light was away from my hand. I could feel the push but it wasn't strong enough to get away from me. That may be why they stay out there, where they don't have to deal with fast orbits and stronger gravity close to the sun. They were far enough from Pluto so it wouldn't pull them in.

When I talked to the skipper again he thought sure as hell I'd flipped and got me in right away, but I had the thing to show them. It turned out I was not so damned smart; because I had to go right back out and watch what happened when they gave the jets a little gentle goose. I wished I'd kept my big mouth shut for a little while.

I'LL tell you, when those jets went on I thought I was going to get it. Those things came flying from all directions like hornets. You know how an orifice heats up, even with a short burst, and how fast it cools off afterward in space? Yeah, I guess you would. Well, every time we gave it even a little goose, those things came flying. I found out the way to do was to stay a few yards forward of the jets and stand still, and they'd go around me to get at the jets. As soon as the metal got cold, some of them would go away. But some stayed on. Just lazy, I guess.

Well, we were pretty excited and we tried to radio Mars;

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Earth's behind the sun right now you know; but the transmission didn't seem to get through. I suppose you can figure out who had to suit up and go outside finally to see what was wrong with the antenna, after the skipper and the Communications Officer had a hell of a beef. And you know what? Every time we tried to transmit with any power at all those damn sawed-off ball-bearings came gathering around the antenna, just like flies around manure. You people've got that, I'm sure; I read somewhere how you were pretty big in ranching and all. It began to look to me like they could soak up any kind of radiant energy, from radio on down to infra-red; and that's the way it turned out. And we found out they could resist heat, too. We couldn't even faze them until we got them damn near red-hot, and that killed them. The trouble was, even though some of them got themselves incinerated in the jets, by that time they were welded on. The orifices got so clogged we didn't dare fire them any more.

Of course we tried a lot of things like sawing the jets clear, but it wasn't any use. Every time we turned on even a little squirt we got those damned things back again.

Well then naturally we didn't want to go barging in on Pluto out of control, so we used the retros and spinners to slow ourselves down into a stable orbit. I suppose you've got what's left of the ship on your radar by now. We couldn't go anywhere and we couldn't transmit, but we could hear incoming messages all right, and we heard how you people were headed out this way and we figured if we could warn you soon enough, you could stay down here and pick us up if we could get down far enough. There don't seem to be any of those things this far in. The crew can make it down here all right if you've got room for us. I see you've got a good big ship here.

WELL there wasn't any way we could contact you by radio so we talked over how one of us could get down here, and it figured out that we didn't have enough air tanks and so on to jet a man in. That wouldn't have attracted any bugs. We call them bugs, but I suppose some damn scientist will look at one through a magnifying glass and put some silly name on it.

There was plenty of time, we knew you wouldn't be here for a while yet, so we had a chance to think things over and make a few haywire experiments, and that rig you saw me in was what came out of it. I practiced guiding myself around for about three weeks. When I want to go

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in a straight line I just shoot arrows the opposite way. You know, for every action there's a . . . And when I went to put on a little spin I just hold one of the arrows out away from me and give it a flip away in the right direction. I'm pretty good at it now. In fact, I figure I can be the world's champion. Maybe in the next Olympic games . . .

You saw all the rest of the stuff.

So that's the scoop, and I don't mind saying I'm damned glad to see you, even if you are a bunch of—even if I don't speak your language. From here you can transmit to what's left of our ship, and the boys'll start coming. They had enough suits rigged for everybody, and by now they ought to have the whole rear end of her sawed up into arrows.

(Statement ends.)

Date: 6 June, 1987.
To: Security Officer, USSR Hq., Mars. (Personal.)
From: Commandant, USSR Hq., Mars.
Code: STS Babushka Y.
Subject: Commandant, USSR Pluto expedition.

Nikolai: Please check subject once again for possible instability or disloyalty. Also find whether he has sent any coded messages to anyone other than me. Also check the security of Code TS Perishka C.

I hope your family is well.

Signed, Vladimir Czmith, commanding.

Date: 10 August, 1987.
To: Ambassador to USA.
From: Kremlin.
Code: None.
Subject: Capitalist propaganda.

Protest vigorously at once ridiculous and insulting story in American newspapers of Soviet spacemen floating in space singing Volga Boat Song and throwing spears.

Signed, J.

THE END

BACK ISSUES SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES AMAZING & FANTASTIC (1964-1969). *All issues of S. F. GREATS, MOST THRILLING S.F., SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS, STRANGE FANTASY, SPACE ADVENTURES, SCIENCE FANTASY ADVENTURES YEARBOOK 1970, SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS YEARBOOK-1970.* (50¢ each). ULTIMATE PUB. CO., BOX 7, OAKLAND GDNS., FLUSHING, N.Y. 11364.

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(*Concluded from page* 83)

showed on the viewscreen, Lee could see that she was still in the conference room, which was now empty, except for her and Richards.

"What is it, Sid?"

"Uh . . . can you come down to my office for a minute? Right now?"

She quickly covered her surprise. "Of course. I'll be right down."

WITHIN a few minutes, she was entering his office. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he said, gesturing her to a chair. "I just wanted to get you out of the grips of that All-American physicist."

"What? Why, you jealous old goat!"

"Never mind. If you want to listen to propositions, please make sure I'm out of earshot."

She laughed. "Is that what you brought me down here for?"

"Yes."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be cute."

"He's a very nice boy."

He frowned. "All right, so I'm foolish and juvenile . . ."

"And he's so interesting," she went on, paying no attention. "He was telling me all about glaciers. In Switzerland. Near this ski lodge. Seems the glaciers have been growing during the past few years. Something I should really be sure to see."

"Sounds fascinating," Lee grumbled.

"Oh, it is. The glaciers, that is. They were retreating, you know, until a few years ago. Now they're growing again. Goes in cycles, it seems . . ."

Lee suddenly stiffened. "Great God of our forefathers!"

"What now?"

Instead of answering, he scrambled out of his chair and went to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase that lined one wall of the office.

"Sid, what's the matter? Did I say something . . ."

But he was not listening to her. "That's it," he was muttering, "That *must* be it."

Elaine watched him paw through the shelves of books, desperately searching for something.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"No. I think . . ." he snatched at a book and riffled through it. "Yes! Look at it!"

He wheeled and shoved the open book at her. She nearly dropped it as he ducked back around his desk and rummaged through a pile of papers.

"Here it is. Look at them!" he shouted, handing her a sheet of paper. "Put them side by side and look at them."

The book was opened to a graph, Elaine saw, that showed the advance and retreat of the Ice Age glaciers over the past

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million years on Earth. The sheet of paper was Childe's graph of the wave patterns of the machine's antennas.

Her face went pale as she looked at the two graphs, side by side. "They . . . they're the same . . . almost identical."

"It all fits together now," Lee said, drumming his fingers on the desktop in a restless tattoo. "The machine beams gravity waves into the interplanetary plasma between the Sun and Mercury. The effect is infinitesimal, by our short-term standards, but over a hundred thousand years or so, the cumulative effect must be enough to block off a small fraction of the Sun's radiation. The Earth goes into a deep freeze for a few millenia!"

"But why?" Elaine asked. "Why did the Others build it?"

LEE paced nervously across the room. "Think a minute. They had beaten the Earthmen in a bitter interstellar war. They had done their best to wipe out the human race. What better way to insure their victory than by subjecting our homeworld to violent climate changes? They probably thought they were guaranteeing the complete extinction of mankind."

"But the Ice Ages didn't destroy man," Elaine said.

"No. They reduced him to the level of a beast, though. Those few survivors of the interstellar war were robbed of their civilization. They had to go back to living in caves, to fighting the other animals for sheer survival. They made it, though, and re-learned what was lost, and built a new civilization."

"Then the machine failed its purpose."

"Right," Lee said. "But remember, it's only an automatic machine. Those who made it, the Others, they're still out there among the stars somewhere. They're going to be mighty upset when they find out that we're not dead."

"It's . . . terrifying . . . in a way."

"The important thing is that we *understand*. Now we can face them, wherever they are. They're no more intelligent than we are. We've proved that by learning what the machine is all about. They may be older, and they certainly know more tricks, but they're not on a completely higher plain of mental development."

Elaine leaned back in her seat. "Well, it's over. A last it's ended. We can leave Titan for good now."

"Leave? Not likely. Now we can finally start to tear the machinery apart and see how it works. We've just been sniffing around it so far, treating it like a museum exhibit. Now we can shut the damned thing off and

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start dissecting it. There's a lot to be done, a whole new technology to be learned. How does it work? Who are the Others and where did they come from? There are more questions to answer now than ever."

"That means that you won't be leaving Titan?" she asked.

"Not for a while. How about you?"

She thought for a moment, then answered, "If you're right about all this, then there should be a lot of archeological evidence awaiting discovery on the Moon. Maybe I should organize a team . . ."

"Then you're leaving anyway," he said.

"For a while, Sid. I'll be back in time."

"Stay off the ski slopes."

She grinned and got up from her chair. Lee kissed her, and she turned away and went to the door. She looked back to say a final word, but he was already at his desk, punching buttons on the automatic secretary:

"All right, you mechanical marvel, call the department heads to the conference room for a meeting in five minutes. And take a message for the Terran Council Science Committee—Gentlemen: It is my belief that the question of the alien machinery on Titan is now essentially solved. . . ."

THE END

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STAR CHAMBER

By H. B. FYFE

There were no courts on the isolated world.

But there was a Judge.

AT the roar of landing rockets, Quasmin's first impulse was to dash out to the hilltop to scan the skies.

When he left his shack, however, he did so cautiously, carrying a small telescope salvaged from the crack-up of his own ship. This planet was so far beyond the Terran sphere of exploration that he feared the newcomers might not be human.

He was surprised to sight the spaceship settling about half a mile away, in the vicinity of the wreck. The lines seemed to be Terran.

"They picked that spot on purpose," he muttered. "Couldn't be somebody after me, could it?"

There was no lack of good reason for the law to be after him. In the first place, the battered hull out there had not belonged to him. In the second, the authorities might be trying to find out what had become of the original crew. Quasmin could not answer that even if he wanted to—a corpse was difficult to locate in interstellar space.

He took advantage of the cooling period after the ship had touched down to make his way through the scrubby growth that resembled a forest except for the purplish color of the drooping fronds. He found a good spy point on a low hill and settled down to watch.

In due time, the airlock within Quasmin's view opened. A single-space-suited figure climbed clumsily down the ladder, paused to glance about, and walked a circuit of the ship as if to survey the terrain.

Apparently deciding that nothing dangerous flew or crept in the vicinity, the spacer returned to the base of the ladder to remove his suit. He dropped it there, hitched at his belt—suggesting to Quasmin the weight of a weapon—and began to stroll across the turf of springy creepers toward the wreck. Quasmin followed as sneakily as he could.

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Passing the strange ship, some instinct told him that it was now unoccupied. The whole attitude of the spacer had suggested a man as much alone as Quasmin himself. The latter temporarily abandoned his skulking pace to walk boldly where he might be seen by any crew members on watch. No activity resulted.

Keeping one eye on the distant figure, Quasmin moved toward the spacesuit at the foot of the ladder. Just as he was about to reach out for it, the air took on the resiliency of sponge-covered springs and thrust his outstretched hand right back at him.

"Force shield!" he growled. "Damn! Probably set to his voice or some such code. Well, I can't get closer, but it proves he must be alone."

He squinted at the nametape on the breast of the spacesuit and read, "J. Trolla."

Then he hurried after the spacer, who was just disappearing behind a clump of shrubbery.

HE could not decide later just when Trolla had in some fashion become aware of him. Quasmin could remember no careless move that might have given him away, nor did he think it likely that he was confronted by a practiced telepath. Such people existed, but they were not normally permitted to risk heir unique talents flitting about the unexplored depths of interstellar space. Quasmin blamed it on natural animal instinct.

If he could have seen Trolla during the latter's inspection of the wrecked ship's interior, he would have worried even more. It was no idle poking about for possible salvage. The spacer spent over an hour examining those compartments accessible without the use of a torch to burn away crumpled metal and plastic bulkheads. He displayed unusual interest in things of obscure value, such as articles of clothing and empty plastic crates that had once held food supplies.

He also talked a good deal to himself in a low voice, but the battered hull concealed this from the man lurking outside.

That there was a watcher there, Trolla stopped doubting when he mentally summed up the amount of minor equipment obviously removed from the ship since the crash. He decided it was not necessary to penetrate the broken-up drive sections in what had been the lower levels before the hull had toppled over. The scavenging looked like the work of one individual unable to salvage any of the heavier machinery.

"Just took some things to make himself more comfortable," he murmured. "A few instruments, food, medicines, self-powered appliances, and the like."

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He considered returning to his own ship for equipment with which to make a real check that would include search for and analysis of fingerprints, hair, perspiration traces . . . and perhaps even blood samples.

"Why waste time?" he asked himself. "It has to be Quasmin, and there's not much chance of finding anyone with him. Why not just see where he's holed up —before he starts running again and makes it a long job?"

Emerging through a rent in the hull, he was again struck by the sensation of being watched. He could not control a slight motion of one hand to his belt for the reassuring touch of his gas gun. With it, he could fill the air around any attacker with a scattering of tiny, anesthetic pellets while the personal force shield he wore would protect him from any hostile return. Though assuming that Quasmin would be armed, he did not think the man could have obtained a shield. None had been reported missing by any law-enforcement agency within imaginable range of this untouched planet.

TROLLA walked about the wreck twice before he spotted the dim trail that revealed infrequent visits to the place. Cautiously, he followed it along the edge of the taller, purplish growth that almost boasted the dimensions of trees, wondering if he would presently detect sounds of someone trailing *him.*

By the time he sighted the crude shack from a low hilltop, he believed he had heard sounds three or four times. They *might* have been indications of native life forms. He forgot about them as he examined the refuge that Quasmin had built.

The hut was crookedly assembled of bulkhead sections ripped from the wreck. There had evidently been batteries available to power simple tools, for lengths of bent plastic were bolted around the corners, and two windows had been cut in the walls. A mound of dirt had been heaped up against one of the sides.

"Digging in for the winter season," muttered Trolla, nodding. "Yes, he'll need some insulation."

He delayed looking inside, lest he provoke some reaction before learning all that he wished. Instead, he walked on past the shack, and thus came upon a small stream and an almost pitiful attempt at building a waterwheel.

"Must work, though," he told himself. "He must have been using it to recharge batteries for the distress calls he has the nerve to keep broadcasting. Wonder if he knows they don't have much effect over fifty billion miles?"

He crossed the brook and

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looked over the two small fields beyond. They had been cleared and roughly ploughed by some laborious means he preferred not to contemplate. It was standard procedure for spaceships to carry planting supplies for just such situations, and he had to approve the beginnings made by Quasmin. Retracing his steps to the shack, he found the opportunity to say so.

"Oh, there you are!" said Quasmin. "I was looking out near your ship to see who landed. Is there just you?"

Trolla savored the glint of animal cunning not quite disguised in the other's glance. He decided to quash the verbal sparring at the outset.

"How many did you expect, Quasmin?" he inquired pleasantly. "My department has to police three planetary systems, spread widely along this frontier. We can't afford fuel and rations to send a brass band after you!"

The shock was good for three or four minutes of bristling silence.

Twice, Quasmin opened his mouth as if to deny his identity, but thought better of it. His scowl faded into an expression of studied insolence.

"So you're a cop," he sneered. "What d'ya think ya gonna do, way out here where ya can hardly even call in to headquarters?"

"That depends," said Trolla, eyeing him analytically. "To be perfectly frank, I can't call headquarters. Don't you know how far out we are from the outmost little observation post of humanity? Or did you just give up all astrogation whenever you got rid of those crewmen you kidnapped?"

"How can you prove I got rid of them?" demanded Quasmin with the same sneer.

"I don't even want to bother. There are eleven murder charges hanging over you besides drug-smuggling and that rape on Vammu IV; and even I can hardly understand that last. Those people are only semi-humanoid!"

Quasmin grinned. Trolla felt vaguely sickened at the sudden realization that his momentary betrayal of a sense of decency was taken as a sign of timidity.

The other turned aside and took a few slow steps to where an empty plastic crate had been braced against a rock for a seat. He sat down and leaned his shoulders against the rock, but with an attitude of alertness. It was the first physical move made by either since Trolla had walked around the corner of the hut.

"Maybe ya think you'll arrest me," he said, watching Trolla carefully. "Maybe ya think I don't pack the same handful of sleep you do!"

"And a shield too?"

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QUASMIN'S eyes narrowed at that. He seemed to estimate his chances of calling a bluff, then relaxed slightly, accepting the truth.

"Suppose we shoot it out, then," he suggested. "You might kill me at this range, with an overdose before the pellets scatter. Ya get too much gas in me, an' you'll be up for murder too."

"That would be your mistake," said Trolla.

"Oh, you might get off," said Quasmin judiciously. "But there lots of people will still say it's murder. You bein' a cop makes no difference. Civilization bein' what it is, the law's gotta protect *me* too! I gotta right to be helped more than average, because I'm in more than average trouble—right?"

Trolla nodded, but less in agreement than confirming some suspicion of his own.

"And you'd refuse to come with me even if I ordered you?"

"What a dummy ya'd be to try an' make me!" grunted Quasmin. "You gotta sleep sometime—an' you'd sure as hell wake up the wrong side of the airlock!"

He grinned at the other with his ugly expression of petty triumph and added, "Ya got nerve to try it after a fair warning?"

"Perhaps not," admitted Trolla.

"Huh! Ya got some sense after all. Why don't ya just go away an' let me alone? Nobody ever gave your bunch jurisdiction out here. I bet this planet was never even reported, was it?"

"It's not on record," Trolla confirmed. "As far as I know, the only humans to reach it are you and I—and I almost turned back. How you picked it up, I don't know, but I was playing a hunch when I picked up your distress call."

Quasmin leaned back in more relaxed fashion.

"Well, ya got a problem," he grinned. "I ain't leavin' here with ya, an' what chance have ya got of bringin' a judge an' jury out here? I gotta right to a fair trial with legal an' psychiatric advice!"

Trolla took two steps to lean his shoulder against a corner of the hut. The ill-constructed joint sagged under his weight.

"Didn't it occur to you that you're having your trial right now?" he asked.

That reached him, he thought, with a certain ironic satisfaction.

Quasmin glared at him in outraged disbelief. He spat on the ground and demanded, "What're ya doin'? Settin' yourself up as judge an' jury all by yourself?"

"And executioner, if need be," agreed Trolla.

He watched in silence as the other's jaw hung slackly, then has Quasmin slowly turned red with temper.

"You . . . you . . . why, ya

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dirty *cop*, ya! That's against every law that ever was. They . . . they wouldn't *let* ya!"

"There's no other way. As you said, they can't send out people to hold a trial here. It isn't safe to take you back alone. They couldn't spare more officers to come with me on the off chance you'd be found way out here."

"No matter how far it is, you ain't got any right to do that!"

Quasmin's right hand was beneath his shirt but Trolla, secure within his shield, ignored that.

"Well, then," he said, "if mere distance doesn't put this planet beyond human law, the same goes for *you*."

"I still have a fair trial comin' then!"

"You're having it right now," Trolla told him.

"Like hell!" Quasmin snarled. He was on his feet now, teetering on his toes. "I know my rights. I oughta be gettin' rescue an' rehabilitation help. *You* can't do anything but kill me. You got no right!"

Trolla pushed off from the corner of the shack with a hunch of his shoulder. He took a few steps toward the trail out of the clearing, then hesitated.

"You've had a lot of rehabilitation work, haven't you?" he pointed out. "I had plenty of time to study your records, on the way out from Blauchen III."

"Ya can't talk me into comin' in for more psych treatments!" growled Quasmin. "I had enough of those guys, since I was a kid."

"Yes, you were a little too smart for them," agreed Trolla. "The most they ever managed was a good, thorough conditioning against suicide, after you put on a psycho act to break up the second trial for murder."

Quasmin grinned again.

"I sure suckered them that time," he recalled with gloating. "The treatment didn't hurt any 'cause I never did have any idea of killin' myself; an' it got me outa the other mess till I could make a break."

"It won't get you out of this one."

Quasmin's grin left him.

"Made up your mind already?" he demanded, half drawing a gas pistol of his own.

"Not yet," said Trolla. "I'll go back to my ship to think it over."

HE walked away, though keeping a prudent watch over his shoulder until he was a hundred meters distant. Even after that, he turned around occasionally. This made it difficult for Quasmin to follow him, but the outlaw managed to be in position to observe Trolla's arrival at his ship.

He spied as the detective recovered his spacesuit and climbed the ladder to the airlock. When there appeared to be no likelihood

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of his emerging for some time, Quasmin scuttled back to his hut.

"No sense bein' here if he comes lookin' for me with his gun an' shield," he growled to himself. "Maybe I bluffed him, an' maybe I didn't."

He threw together a small bundle of rations and rolled it with a water bottle in a blanket. As he did so, he muttered a stream of curses.

"He's got no right to try anythin'," he reassured himself. "The law says I gotta have a chance at rehabilitation whether I co-operate or not. I didn't make up the law, but I can use it as much as he can. He wouldn't dare overgas me!"

His anger helped him start out at a brisk pace. In less than three hours, he reached an area of rough, cliff-broken hills where there were caves that would take Trolla weeks to check. There he concealed himself for the night.

Sometime during the darkness, a distant rumble awakened him.

Suspiciously, Quasmin poked his head out of the cave in which he had been sleeping. He was just in time to see the flare of rockets in the starry sky.

"He backed down!" was his triumphant conclusion.

He watched the flaring light until he was satisfied that Trolla was making for space and not for another landing place. Then he returned to sleep.

Just to be sure, Quasmin remained in the hills two more days, until his supplies ran low and he thought it might be comfortable to return to the hut. He made his way back warily, lest Trolla should have left some sort of trap.

At the shack, he found nothing but his own things, so he hiked through the purplish shrubbery to the landing spot. To his surprise, he discovered that Trolla had left a number of crates behind. He sat down to think that over.

When no explanation occurred to him, he went to the wreck of his own ship. In the partly stripped control room were a few instruments that still functioned when he hooked up batteries to power them.

"Might be smart to see if he's in orbit," he muttered. "Maybe he thinks he can soften me up by leaving presents."

Emerging an hour later, he looked puzzled. As much by luck as by skill and accuracy, he had succeeded in picking up Trolla's ship on the rangefinder. The instrument was not meant to operate efficiently through an atmosphere and Quasmin was no expert in its use; but it definitely showed Trolla was heading out-system.

"Well, then, I might as well see if he left a bomb," decided Quasmin.

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He approached the crates close enough to read the stenciled labels. Scowling in bewilderment, he set about opening them. Just as the lettering indicated, he found an assortment of electric motors, equipment for building a new generator that could be powered by his waterwheel, and even a supply of glow-panels for light if he should get an electrical system into operation.

There was also a chest of tools and parts, and several boxes of grain and vegetable seeds. The prize of all was a small, three-wheeled, battery-powered vehicle that looked just large enough to pull a homemade plow.

The man sat on an open crate and burst into hysterical laughter.

"All a bluff!" he chortled. "I *knew* he didn't dare do anything!"

It was after he staggered to his feet to haul the little machine from its crate that he found Trolla's note attached to the handlebar.

Dear Quasmin, it said. *As you tried to point out, there is some argument whether a society has any moral right to punish a criminal or merely an obligation to help him heal himself.*

Quasmin roared with laughter. He looked up at the clear sky.

"That's right, Trolla! I'm *sick*—an' don't you forget it!"

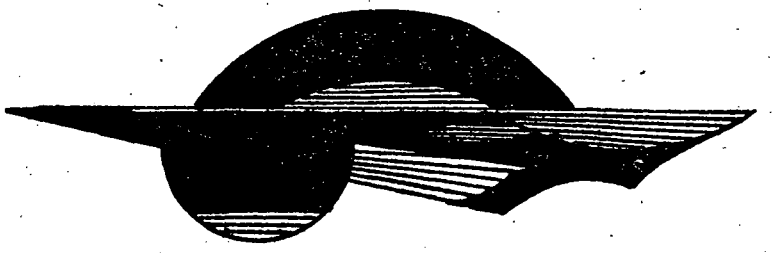
On the other hand, he read on, *an individual owes support to the society that protects his rights. I think a breach of the contract by one party nullifies it for the other too. Think that over—Trolla.*

Quasmin scowled at the words, then at the sky, and finally at the tools and materials that would help maintain him on this strange planet for many years.

"Years and years and years," he muttered, glancing about at the hanging, purplish fronds in the silent background.

A stunned expression crept over his face, as he realized what kind of sentence had been passed upon him.

THE END



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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61)

In the instant before his world went blank, Joao heard his father's voice calling strongly: "Joao! Do not resist! Put down your weapons!"

The trampled grassy earth of the campsite, Joao saw, was coming up to meet his face.

It cannot be my father, Joao thought. *My father is dead and they've copied him . . . mimicry, nothing more.*

Darkness.

There was a dream of being carried, a dream of tears and shouting, a dream of violent protests and defiance and rejection.

He awoke to yellow-orange light and the figure who could not be his father bending over him, thrusting a hand out, saying: "Then examine my hand if you don't believe!"

But Joao's attention was on a face behind his father. It was a giant face, baleful in the strange light, its eyes brilliant and glaring with pupils within pupils. The face turned, and Joao saw it was no more than two centimeters thick. Again, it turned, and the eyes focused on Joao's feet.

Joao forced himself to look down, began trembling violently as he saw he was half enveloped in a foaming green cocoon, that his skin shared some of the same tone.

"Examine my hand!" ordered the old-man figure beside him.

"He has been dreaming." It was a resonant voice that boomed all around him, seemingly coming from beneath the giant face. "He has been dreaming," the voice repeated. "He is not quite awake."

With an abrupt, violent motion, Joao reached out, clutched the proferred hand.

It felt warm . . . human.

For no reason he could explain, tears came to Joao's eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" he whispered. He shook his head to clear away the tears.

"Joao, my son," said his father's voice.

Joao looked up at the familiar face. It *was* his father and no mistake. "But . . . your heart," Joao said.

"My pump," the old man said. "Look." And he pulled his hand away, turned to display where the back of his black suit had been cut away, its edges held by some gummy substance, and a pulsing surface of oily yellow between those cut edges.

Joao saw the hair-fine scale lines, the multiple shapes, and he recoiled.

So it was a copy, another of their tricks.

THE old man turned back to face him. "The old pump failed and they gave me a new one," he said. "It shares my blood and lives off me and it'll give me a few more years. What

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do you think our bright IEO specialists will say about the *usefulness* of that?"

"Is it really you?" Joao debanded.

"All except the pump," said the old man. "They had to give you and some of the others a whole new blood system because of all the corrosive poison that got into you."

Joao lifted his hands, stared at them.

"They know medical tricks we haven't even dreamed about," the old man said. "I haven't been this excited since I was a boy. I can hardly wait to get back and . . . Joao! What is it?"

Joao was thrusting himself up, glaring at the old man. "We're not human any more if . . . We're not human!"

"Be still, son!" the old man ordered.

"If this is true," Joao protested, "they're in control." He nodded toward the giant face behind his father. "They'll *rule* us!"

He sank back, gasping. "We'll be their slaves."

"Foolishness," rumbled the drum voice.

Joao looked at the giant face, growing aware of the fluorescent insects above it, seeing that the insects clung to the ceiling of a cave, noting finally a patch of night sky and stars where the fluorescent insects ended.

"What is a slave?" rumbled the voice.

Joao looked beneath the face where the voice originated, saw a white mass about four meters across, a pulsing yellow sac protruding from it, insects crawling over it, into fissures along its surface, back to the ground beneath. The face appeared to be held up from that white mass by dozens of round stalks, their scaled surfaces betraying their nature.

"Your attention is drawn to our way of answering your threat to us," rumbled the voice, and Joao saw that the sound issued from the pulsing yellow sac. "This is our brain. It is vulnerable, very vulnerable, weak, yet strong . . . just as your brain. Now, tell me what is a slave?"

Joao fought down a shiver of revulsion, said: "I'm a slave now; I'm in bondage to you."

"Not true," rumbled the voice. "A slave is one who must produce wealth for another, and there is only one true wealth in all the universe—living time. Are we slaves because we have given your father more time to live?"

JOAO looked up to the giant, glittering eyes, thought he detected amusement there.

"The lives of all those with you have been spared or extended as well." drummed the voice.

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"That makes us your slaves, does it not?"

"What do you take in return?"

"Ah, hah!" the voice fairly barked. "Quid pro quo! You are, indeed, our slaves as well. We are tied to each other by a bond of mutual slavery that cannot be broken—never could be."

"It is very simple once you understand it," Joao's father said.

"Understand what?"

"Some of our kind once lived in greenhouses and their cells remembered the experience," rumbled the voice. "You know about greenhouses, of course?" It turned to look out at the cave mouth where dawn was beginning to touch the world with grey. "That out there, that is a greenhouse, too." Again, it looked down at Joao, the giant eyes glaring. "To sustain life, a greenhouse must achieve a delicate balance—enough of this chemical, enough of that one, another substance available when needed. What is poison one day can be sweet food the next."

"What's all this to do with slavery?" Joao demanded.

"Life has developed over millions of years in this greenhouse we call Earth," the voice rumbled. "Sometimes it developed in the poison excrement of other life . . . and then that poison became necessary to it. Without a substance produced by the wireworm, that savannah grass out there would die . . . in time. Without substances produced by . . . insects, your kind of life would die. Sometimes, just a faint trace of the substance is needed, such as the special copper compound produced by the arachnids. Sometimes, the substance must subtly change each time before it can be used by a life form at the end of the chain. The more different forms of life there are, the more life the greenhouse can support. This is the lesson of the greenhouse. The successful greenhouse must grow many times many forms of life. The more forms of life it has, the healthier it is."

"You're saying we have to stop killing insects," Joao said. "You're saying we have to let you take over."

"We say you must stop killing yourselves," rumbled the voice. "Already, the Chinese are . . . I believe you would call it: *reinfesting* their land. Perhaps they will be in time, perhaps not. Here, it is not too late. There . . . they were fast and thorough . . . and they may need help."

"You . . . give us no proof," Joao said.

"There will be time for proof, later," said the voice. "Now, join your woman friend outside; let the sun work on your skin and the chlorophyll in your blood, and when you come back, tell me if the sun is your slave."

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greendark in the cairn

By ROBERT ROHRER

Capt. Stanley found out that if you can only sink low enough, it is possible to climb high. But he found this out the hard way.

ALL RIGHT MISTER YOU KNOW YOURE CRACKING UP YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE GOING OVER THE EDGE WHY DONT YOU ADMIT THAT YOURE BATS MISTER YOU ARE BATS UP THERE IN THE WHERE ITS SUPPOSED TO BE YOU AINT GOT IT NO MORE ("Captain.") MISTER YOU WANT TO SEE THE INSIDE OF HELL MISTER WELL ("Captain Stanley.") LOOK

"Captain Stanley."

"What?" Stanley turned in his swivel chair. Jackson, the first mate, was standing in the doorway of Stanley's cabin. Stanley had been facing the rear wall, but now he put his feet back under his desk and leaned forward on his elbows. He said, "What?"

"We've got her in the scopes, sir. Any time you're ready we can start the run."

"All right, Jackson. I—" YOU WANT TO SEE THE INSIDE OF HELL (". . . I'll be . . .") AGAIN MISTER LIKE YOU SAW IT BEFORE WITH THE BLOOD ("Captain?") AND THE

"Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm okay." Stanley stood up. He wanted to make this run. He knew that something awful was happening inside him and that it might be the same thing that had gotten him once before, but he wanted to make this run. He wanted to be the one to get those butchers. Those ugly butchers. He could hold on. He could hold on that long—

HOLD ON HOLD ON WATCH THE CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM REMEMBER THE CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM WHEN YOU WERE PULLING BACK UP OUT OF ONE OF THEM AND YOU HELD ONTO THE CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM AND THEY WERE LITTLE CRACKS AND YOUR FINGERS WERE TOO BIG TOO TOO TOO BIG BIG DO YOU RE-

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MEMBER THE SHEETS AND THE SWEAT AND THE ROCKS INSIDE YOUR RIBS MISTER (pull out) THE SWEAT SHVIERING DOWN YOUR FACE (pull out, pull out, How many)

"How many was it they killed, Jackson?" asked Stanley, although he knew how many. They were walking down the corridor toward the main lift, now.

"Fifteen hundred, sir. Fifteen hundred, with women, and—"

CHILDREN YOU SEE THEM MISTER IN THE FIRE YOU PUT THEM THERE YOU SEE THEM WATCH THEM DIE ("She's probably)

"Out of ammo, her guns are dark, but I think a silent run's the safest thing, sir. It could be a trick. And this is our last torp."

"Yeah," said Stanley. He was angry about the children. Being angry about them helped him forget that it was his fault they were dead.

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

Cold sweat burst out all over Stanley's body. He had thought that before. He had thought that —the last time. All the time, the last time. And the voice, the voice was the same . . .

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

"We'll get them," said Stanley. "These won't get away."

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

He had ground his teeth over that one, it had kept coming again and again, he hadn't been able to think anything else—

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

ADMIT IT MISTER YOU ARE C-R-A-C-K-I-N-G U-P WHY DON'T YOU QUIT FIGHTING IT (fight it) LET IT COME (pull out, pull, How)

"How?" It quivered stupidly into the frigid air of the cylindrical cab of the main lift. The lift was going up, toward the attack room.

"How what, sir?" asked Jackson.

THERE, now he had to think of a question or Jackson would know for sure he was going crackers and wouldn't let him make the run (like hell, I'm captain, I'll give the orders) think think

"How does it look, Jackson? I mean, how does it look to *you?*"

"It looks fine, sir." Was there something in his voice, a shadow. . . ? "We've only got one torp left, but we'll get them, if it isn't a trap, and I don't see how it could be. The guns are dark, and with our scrambler up and our jets off they won't spot us until we're too close and then they. . ."

No, there was nothing in Jackson's voice. Nothing beyond the

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usual undulating dullness that always tore away at whatever Jackson happened to be talking about, whether it was the fuel supply or women or how to get the enemy before the enemy got the ship. Now Jackson was talking about killing a thousand ugly butchers, and he was making it sound dull.

Everything looked dull to Stanley. The angles of the cab seemed blurred and flattened, the lights of the control board did not jab into his eyes but seemed honed-down, like full-color pictures of themselves

THEMSELVES AGAINST THE WALLS TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM THE FIRE BUT IT CAUGHT THEM ALL AND IT WAS YOUR FAULT YOU SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN THEM THROUGH STUPID STUPID YOU STUPID (when this happened it was as though he couldn't see) AND REMEMBER THAT OTHER SHIP YOU LOST YOUR OWN SHIP (it was as though his eyes could see but his mind couldn't, and there was the wall of the cab and he could see it, but not beyond the very tips of his corneas) AND REMEMBER YOUR SHIP BURNING IN THE CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM AND HURTING YOUR FINGERS SO YOU LET GO AND FELL BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN AND

What is the matter with me? thought Stanley, furiously shaking his head. He thought it because he was trying to fool himself. He knew what was wrong. Losing another ship, even though this one hadn't been his own, had torn off the old scab, and his mind was gushing out and away as it had once before. Losing this ship was worse than losing the other, because this one had been a passenger ship, and it had been his responsibility to protect it. He had failed. Those butchers had somersaulted right under his belly and had powdered that civvy passenger ship and the people had come flying out and had twirled away into the void. He had watched. He had chased those butchers and harried them halfway across the Forth Quadrant, and now he *had* them, he—

DO YOU WANT TO SEE THE INSIDE OF HELL

Stop! Stanley barely kept himself from clapping his hands over his ears. He wasn't going crazy, he wasn't going crazy, not now, no no *no*.

ADMIT IT MISTER YOURE CRACKING UP

No!

WHYTHEGREENDARKINTHECAIRNMIDWAYWHYTHEGREENDARKINTHECAIRNMIDWAYWHY

No! But they were there again, he could feel them, the rocks in his ribs *No!* he had to make this run and kill those butchers

Then he saw the inside of HELL

ADMIT IT MISTER YOURE CRACKING UP

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Yes. He had to. Admit it.

LET IT COME

He let it come.

IMMEDIATELY he knew that something was wrong. Instead of being immersed by an awful flood of depression, the shores of his mind cleared. His thoughts focussed. Colors and images regained their former sharpness. Through his entire body there spread a warm numbness.

Something was wrong, something was wrong. Suddenly Stanley *wanted* to tell Jackson that something was wrong. He formed the words in his mind: *Jackson, I don't feel well.* He tried to say the words.

He couldn't.

The door of the lift opened, and Stanley and Jackson stepped into the corridor that led to the attack room. Stanley heard his footfalls on the vinyl floor, but he didn't feel them in his legs. Then he knew what was wrong. He no longer had control over his body.

He was well away from the edge of chaos now. He hadn't gone over. This wasn't like the last time at all. This was something else. Something that had ridden in on the wave of insanity that had threatened to swamp him.

They reached the door of the attack room. Stanley pressed his hand against the sensory lock and the door slid open. He did that by his own volition, he could still do a harmless, necessary thing like that, but he couldn't tell Jackson that he didn't feel well—

In the attack room, Ross and Price were making adjustments on the various instruments that would be used in the run. They stood on opposite sides of the room. At first Stanley was surprised that Price was there, but in the next instant he wasn't surprised at all. Price knew how to handle silent torp runs the best of anyone in the crew. Price was there to take over if Stanley dropped out. Jackson was suspicious, after all.

Ross was second mate and nearest the door. Stanley returned Ross's salute, he could do that, that was necessary. He didn't like Ross because Ross was smart and let Stanley know it with his eyes and his face, if not with his voice. At that very moment, underneath his stiff, spade-handed officer's-school salute, Ross was looking superiorly at Stanley. *Damn you, Ross,* thought Stanley.

Price was sweating over the guts of the range calculator. Price was the ship's mechanical genius. He had an office of his own. If anything went wrong with the ship, Price could fix it; if anything went wrong with a sailor in a key battle position,

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Price could take over. Stanley didn't mind Price because Price was smart in a line of work that Stanley had never even considered following. Stanley saluted Price.

Price said, "Just about ready, sir."

Stanley nodded and said, "Jackson, connect with the rocket room and tell Geryng to transfer control up here."

"Yes, sir."

Stanley moved toward the control platform. He could still give necessary orders, whatever was controlling him wasn't keeping him from—

Whatever. If he was being controlled, there had to be a whatever that was controlling him, didn't there? So, what could it, who would, who *could*—

He saw the truth. He saw it because suddenly he remembered a pattern.

Many of the enemy's ships had wriggled out of inescapable positions in the past few months of the war. Nothing definite was known about the scientific achievements of the enemy. But many times, enemy ships had escaped from seemingly impossible situations because of blunders made by sailors of the Earthfleet; small, stupid blunders that might have been written off as chance had similar errors not occurred again and again. A rumor had spread through the ranks that the enemy was able to control minds. Stanley had scoffed at the rumor. Now he believed it. The butchers had taken over his mind.

THE "control platform" was a slightly raised, circular section of the floor. It was set before the large, cross-haired lens-viewport. It was ringed by a semi-elastic railing. A flat control board with a microphone was mounted on the railing. Stanley would use the controls to adjust the course of the ship and to release the torp. The railing was hung around with black, cylindrical hand grenades, which were to be used if the enemy boarded the ship during a battle —a not uncommon occurrence during engagements between smaller vessels, which quickly ran out of ammunition.

Stanley took his position on the platform. He didn't want to. He wanted to step aside and let Price take over, because he saw, he saw what those butchers were going to do, they were going to make him *miss*. They were going to make him miss with the ship's last torpedo, and that would be that, because the enemy ship was a battleship, and for the crew of an attack craft to board a battleship would be suicide.

Depression began to seep into Stanley's mind. He was to be the instrument of escape of the

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butchers who had destroyed a ship in his charge, a civilian passenger ship filled with innocents. It had been his fault that they had gotten the passenger ship. They always tried for the biggest kills, the ones that would blow the largest holes in the morale of the Earthfleet, but Stanley had been stupid, he had thrown up his defense around the smaller, ammunition-bearing merchant ships.

Now, suddenly, he saw that it was his fault that the butchers had gained control of his mind. That attack of madness, that hadn't been a real attack at all, it had been a red herring, a patchwork fraud made of memories culled from his mind by the enemy to frighten him, to make him submit to control, to make him "let it come." If he had fought that "madness" til the end, they would not have succeeded. If he had shucked his ego and told Jackson to let Price make the run, their attempts would have been made futile.

He had done nothing. They had him now because of his own weakness, and for no other reason.

"Ready, sir."

Stanley's hands reached out and began dusting across the control board with the rapidity of *expertise*, throwing up the scrambler, starting the ship with one burst of the rockets, priming the torp; the enemy ship clicked into visibility under the infrared spotlights; the flexible, magnifying lens-viewport automatically adjusted to keep the image of the ship larger-than-life in the cross-hairs as Stanley's vessel moved closer.

Despair was slowly eating away at Stanley's mind. The butchers had gotten to him by reviving his memories of all the little hells he had been through and using them as levers, thousands of tiny levers to pry up his resistance and topple it. They had reminded him of all his previous degradations, the big ones and the small ones; they had made him believe that he was about to go through them all over again—and he had *given in* and let the debasement come. He now saw himself as a simpering weakling, the simpering weakling he really was, he had always been weak, he recalled and reviewed all the events of his pitiful life and saw that he had been only an ineffectual stand-in performer in them, an impotent novice who shouted directions to the other players but could never quite make them hear and obey, he was weak, weak, *weak* (the instruments on the control board told him that the battleship was only twenty miles away now, a few minutes, a few few minutes) they had played on his weakness. They were counting on his

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weakness now, for he knew that there was only one thing he could do to balk them but he was too afraid of death to do it (closer now, ready on the red switch)

besides, killing himself would be hard. He would have to fool the butchers, they wouldn't let him make any moves that might spoil their little plan, he would have to plot out a careful course of false impressions to kill himself, and he would have to do it in such a way that the others in the attack room couldn't stop him, and he would have to do it *quickly* because—There, there, he was planning, that was a start. He told himself, *You have to do it, you know, or those butchers will get away, you have to kill yourself*

NO. He didn't want to die. He was afraid of death. What if there wasn't anything after he was dead, what then? What would it be like then? No, he couldn't

You've got to do it. He began to taunt and shame himself. *Are you going to let them get away to kill more little children? It's your fault those others are dead, are you going to let their killers get away alive, the killers of little children*

No. All this outrage was gone. Only a mushiness in his chest remained. He had to try something else; he began to call himself names he had never been able to call himself before because he had been afraid that they were true; he lashed himself mercilessly, trying, trying to strike a spark somewhere, the spark of hate, the spark of duty, the spark of manhood—

Nothing worked. His fingers continued their automatic journeys across the control board, slowly working their small sabotages on the angles and the timings, small sabotages that would build up to one big sabotage that would make the last torp go hurtling past the enemy hull. He sank, his spirit was melting under his feet like an icecube in the sun and his boots were sinking in. He wasn't a man, he wasn't a captain, he wasn't anything, they had taken everything away from him, all the masks he had used to hide the truth of himself from himself, the truth of what he was—a puling, crawling *weakling!* He could no longer even despise himself. He was beneath his own contempt. He no longer wanted to live.

No longer wanted to live.

He felt around the thought carefully, testing it to see if it would spring shut on him and leave him paralyzed as all the others had. Finally he found he could jab openly at the thought and it stayed put. It was genuine. He didn't want to live. He had so lost respect for himself

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that he wanted to be free of himself; and his only means of escape was death.

Those damned butchers had taken too much from him! The fools had so completely demolished the edifice of his ego that he could climb over the ruins without the ladder of courage!

He began to think (they can't control my thinking, damn them), how could he fool them, how could he do it quickly so that Jackson and Ross and Price wouldn't see it coming?

He wanted very much to be dead, so he thought of an idea quickly. He had to make them believe it was natural for him to talk to Weaver in the control room. To do that, he had to make *himself* believe it was natural for him to talk to Weaver in the control room, had to fool himself.

He never talked to Weaver in the control room during a run, it wasn't necessary for Stanley to communicate with the control room because he had complete control of the ship. But he often talked to Weaver other times. Weaver had once left a message in Stanley's office, "Must talk with you, urgent," and Stanley could not remember ever answering that message months ago. Weaver had something urgent to tell him, he had to find it out, hadtohadto he formed the *thought*

Pick the microphone up and talk to Weaver in the torpedo room.

His hand moved and lifted the slim cylinder of black metal and pressed it to his mouth. His lips said, "This is Captain Stanley, Weaver. Weaver?"

Increase volume.

His hand moved up. He thought of a false image of increasing volume. Someone shouted. One of Stanley's fingers slipped through the ring and pulled. The impact of the explosion pulverized his ribs and scooped the flesh from the hollow of his chest.

Jackson scrambled to his feet and yelled, "Take it, Price!" and he and Ross pulled what was left of Captain Stanley out of the control room.

"Sweet Heaven," said Jackson.

"What the hell—why—?" said Ross.

Both were stupefied. Ross said, "He picked it up and talked into it, just like he thought it was the mike, but what—what could have made him mistake a grenade for a microphone?"

Jackson said, "He was acting strange all today. He must have cracked up."

"I'll bet it was the kids."

There was a flash, and the blue-white, spitting flare that had been the enemy battleship swayed past a porthole.

THE END

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He believed the old tales, the weird tales . . .

They festered in his mind . . . and he dreamed of

how he would use . . . how passionately he would use . . .

THE BORGIA HAND

By ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrated by ADRAGNA

THE pedlar passed through town the day the blacksmith died. That day the boy had been walking in the hills above Braunau, studying the moist foliage and the departing thunderheads, so he did not hear of the visit until evening.

When Fritz, his best friend, told him, the boy looked down at his withered right hand and great tears welled into his eyes.

"I have missed him! Now I will never be a man!"

"Nonsense!" laughed Fritz. "It is only a fairy tale. You can't really believe that story!"

"It rained today—and the

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smith had great muscles. I have missed him!"

Fritz looked away from his friend's face.

"He was buried before he grew cold. The body was not displayed —but, surely, there can be nothing to the story . . ."

"Did his widow rush to the bank?"

"Yes, there was some business concerning his estate. But—"

"Which way did he go?"

Fritz gestured up the road.

"How long ago?"

"Five or six hours."

The boy ran all the way home, to get his savings.

* * *

The dark sack of the pedlar was a sleeping animal at the foot of the great oak. The man with the floppy hat and the brown cloak sat upon a rock, pipe in hand. He watched the trail behind him, as the boy laboriously threaded his way among the rocks and roots.

"Good evening, grandfather," puffed the boy, throwing himself to the ground.

"Good evening, boy," smiled the pedlar. "I am not your grandfather, nor anyone else's."

"I know," panted the boy. "I know who you are."

"Oh?" He tamped more tobacco into his pipe and relighted it. "Suppose you try naming me."

The boy sighed, massaging his right hand with his left.

"You have more names than this tree has leaves. But first I'll try Ahasuerus, harbinger of storms, and Prince Cartaphilus, the much-beloved, then Isaac Laquedem, the pedlar—"

"Stop!" said the man. "Do not repeat them all in my presence. It might prove fatal." He regarded the boy with interest.

"Names have a certain virtue —yours, for instance, is too long. Someday you shall change it."

"I didn't follow you in order to discuss names," said the youth, "and I didn't mention mine. I came to strike a bargain."

The pedlar glanced at his sack.

"Pans, pots, thread, needles?"

The boy laughed, shaking his head.

"The smith had great muscles. What did you buy, his biceps?"

"What makes you think I deal in anatomy?"

"The old stories," began the boy. "They can't all be wrong. When Isaac was cursed to walk the earth forever, he was given eternal life without eternal youth. Over the centuries he mastered the art of transplanting fresh muscles, organs, and bones, to replace his aging ones. I know what you have in that sack!" He jerked his head toward the base of the oak. "Sometimes you strike a bargain with a mortal, and sell someone a new foot, a mighty arm, an eye that can see, or a new hand . . ."

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"I see," said the pedlar. "Why do you want a new hand?"

THE boy stared for a long while at his useless fingers.

"Do you need to ask that question? I cannot use my own, and I want one that works."

"I suppose you want one with the powerful wrist of a fencer, to duel at the universities?"

The boy shook his head. He stood.

"No, ageless one, I don't want to duel. I do not know whether you are a servant of God or the devil, but I will pay you whatever you ask for a hand that can reach this high and still work." He pointed with his left index finger at a spot above his head. "Put such a hand on this wrist," he gestured, "and I will give you my soul, if you ask it."

"Do not be so hasty to dispose of your soul, boy," said the pedlar.

He crossed to the foot of the oak, his face obscured by pipe smoke and evening.

"I do have a hand here, one which has written many pages of history."

He tugged a cord and the sack suddenly yawned, like an awakened snake.

"What will you do if you have a new hand, and can raise it this high?" He threw his own hand up over his head.

"I shall paint," said the boy, "my city, the mountains, the trees, the people, sunrises, sunsets . . . I shall make them all mine! On canvas."

"Enough," interrupted the pedlar. "I see that you would be an artist." He dipped his hand into the sack, and the boy thought he saw an unnatural shimmering within its dark interior. Then he drew forth . . .

A hand!

A right hand. Pink. Smooth-cut at the wrist, as though freshly-severed from an arm—though no blood ran. A small, strong hand.

The boy gasped, then he stepped behind the great oak and was sick.

Stepping back into the clearing, he asked, weakly, "Can you really put it on my arm?"

"Of course, if you want it."

"Certainly I want it! Why shouldn't I?"

"Some people," said the pedlar, "are so vitally alive, that they invade every atom of their being with the sheer intensity of their wills, their purposes. I wondered, for a long time, whether this power could be communicated.

"This hand," he waved it, "belonged to Caesare Borgia. He was an artist, true. But he was many other things. I stole it on the day he died, in order to perform an experiment. Years ago, while travelling in Corsica, I gave it to

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a boy with a condition similar to yours. You know his name. I think even he was a little afraid of the hand, because he generally held it out of sight. I had to journey to St. Helena to retrieve it, but I still haven't proved anything. One trial is never sufficient."

"I am not afraid of the hand," said the boy, "and I will be an even greater artist in my way than Bonaparte was in his. How much do you want for it?"

"It cost me nothing. I will transfer it to you for nothing, since you know the story and are not afraid."

The boy rolled up his sleeve and smiled.

"It's a deal. Put it there."

The pedlar laughed, seizing the useless hand he extended.

"It will not take long," he said, "and someday I shall return to the land of Luther and Goethe, to see how you have raised it."

"High!" cried the boy, eyes blazing.

THE END

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Continued from page 35

his wounds; but he'll be back. He'll be back because he cannot help himself, because he loves me as much as I love him. Do you know what it's like, Simon, to love someone so much it makes you sick inside?" she asked. "That is how I love this man. And do you know what it's like to love someone that much and yet not be able to indulge your love because the punishment has not yet been exacted? Do you know what it is like to worship the ground someone walks on, and have the ground forbidden to you? Do you, Simon? Do You?"

He realized a long while later that it was her slender throat that his hands were gripping, that it was her tender flesh into which his furious fingers had dug. He released her then, and she slipped limply to the floor and lay there staring sightlessly at the ceiling. All he could think of was a rubber doll.

THERE were the *stong* bars. After reaching Fish Alley, he stopped in the first one he came to and ordered a drink and told the barmaid to leave the bottle on the bar. It was the way it had been the last time, almost. This time, though, the room didn't turn into the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. It turned into a long, doorless corridor with blood-red walls. At the end of it a huge idol sat upon an obsidian throne. He walked down the corridor slowly, stumbling now and then. The idol's hair was tawny in hue, and consisted of tiny metallic snakes. Her eyes were green-gold agates. Her black dress was pulled above her knees, and her white-brimmed bonnet was pushed back from her forehead. The front of her dress was open, and one of her marble breasts hung out. A sacrifice had just been performed on the altar that stood before her throne, and she was frozen in the act of plucking an object out of the victim's face. The victim was Christopher Stark, and the object was an eye.

Simon Peters threw the bottle he was carrying at her, and collapsed unconscious to the floor.

THE dark alley in which he awoke smelled of sewer gas. His billfold was gone, and so was his hypno gun and his watch. His head was throbbing. He got to his feet after a while, and staggered into the street. His chest bubbled when he breathed, and his legs would barely support him. For some reason his trousers were too long for him, and he kept tripping on the cuffs. An eternity passed before he reached the city-locks; another, before he finally gained his ketch.

He blasted off without delay, and set the time-space nexus-

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compensator for his final destination. With a little luck he could still upset the apple cart of time. With a little luck he could, by altering a single moment, change his entire life. *Begone,* he would say to young Chris Stark. *Cast your net in safer waters!* Right now, though, he was tired. Right now, he would sleep.

He retired to his small cabin and collapsed upon the bunk. The shuddering of the ketch as it came out of transphotic awakened him. "Priscilla," he murmured, and eyes still closed, reached out for her beloved body. His hands found nothing but twisted sheets and emptiness, and at last, with horrible abruptness, the realization that she was dead and that he had killed her got through to him. His anguish was unendurable. He got up and fumbled among his belongings for some token, some sign, that she had not ceased to be, some remnant of her that would drive the shadow of her death into a dark corner of the room; and he found, finally, the little hypnocamera with its undeveloped roll of imperishable film. He was as excited as a little child, and like a little child, he got his developing kit and sat down in the middle of the floor and began to play. The picture came out perfectly. She was so lovely that he wanted to cry. He covered her image with kisses, and turned the photograph over and wrote her name and address on the back. *Priscilla Petrovna,* he wrote. *Miltonia, Europa.*

A bell began to ring. Thrusting the photograph into his pocket, he went to investigate. It was the bob-bell: a school of fishes was approaching the catamaran—it was time to get into his togs and tanks. After reversing the ship's direction and adjusting it to a speed just beneath average meteor-velocity, he hurried down into the hold. He wondered what made him so weak. His legs felt like broomsticks, his arms, like pipestems. His hands had atrophied into shriveled claws. A phrase came out of the thickening forest of his memory and trailed through the murky clearing of his mind —*an acceleration in cellular breakdown, accompanied by rapid synaptic deterioration.* He shook his head. The words were meaningless to him. Opening the locker, he took out one of the spacesuits and struggled into it. He could not find his net. No matter. He would reach forth and snare the fishes with his hands. "For you, Priscilla," he whispered, "for you," and activated the locks and stepped through them—into space.

Ketches have no outer decks. Nor are ketch-spaceboots magnetized. Ketches are not catam-

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arans, never were and never will be.

THUS Simon Peters, nee Christopher Stark, torn by his own impetuosity from the gravitic pull of his hurtling craft, went into free fall in the Alpha Centauri Archipelago where he had thought in his naïveté to rip out a single stitch in the cosmic hem of time. As he fell, Death reached out and touched his hand, and he pulled his hand away. "No," he said, "not yet—I do not yet know who I am." At his feet lay the red-gold billiard ball of Alpha Centauri. At his elbow, a pale planet poised. Coldness came and grew within him, and as the coldness grew, so too grew Christopher Stark. The red-gold sun diminished, and the pale planet waned; the whisperings of the immensities sounded faintly in his ears. He looked forth upon creation with supernovae-eyes and breathed deeply of the abysmal darkness of the night. There was still time for one more cast. The myriad stars of his macrocosmic net rustled as he unfurled it, and the stellar sinews of his Brobdingnagian arm grew taut. Back, back now, the shoulders slanting, now turn and slowly turn, the arm rising, the arm of stars, of giants and dwarfs and little motes of dust that micro-men call worlds; the star-arm rising and the star-net swinging wide; now out, now down, the stars he thought, the stars that are my genes, my chromosomes, my corpuscles, my strength, my life, my death and my undoing, the white stars and the blues, the reds, the flaming yellows—I am all—all am I, Christopher Stark, immensities am I, global clusters and cosmic storms; nebulae and Pleiades and island universes; I am the stars and space, I am the star fisherman in all the coruscating glory of his youth . . . and he swung his great and glittering arm and cast his net—

And snared himself.

THE END

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(Continued from second cover)

He smiled, disbelieving in jinn.

Now, Thomas made to let fall the bottle but, bethinking him that an empty bottle would serve to hold water wherewith to quench his thirst on his journey, he broke the seal and loosed the stopper.

Whereupon a jinni jetted out through the mouth of the bottle and uprose in a cloud very like a mushroom, while the force of its release impelled the bottle to shoot from off the pad of Thomas's hand.

And the bottle dashed to bits against a rock. Wherefore Thomas called again upon the Lord.

THEN he heard the voice of the jinni, which said, and its voice seemed the sands singing, Be not afeared, for by the Lord you have sworn by, and by my master, Solomon, the flight of the bottle is not against nature (it shall be given to one Isaac to come upon the laws of motion, the third of which is applicable here), nor am I, if you but knew the laws.

And again Thomas called the name of the Lord and said, This is nothing other than the voice of madness, for I am suffering a stroke of the sun.

And the jinni answered, saying, Nay, I am what my master, Solomon, made me, a gaseous-state computer having power to answer three questions. I can set to rest your doubts about anything under the sun or among the stars. Ask, and you shall receive. Thrice ask, and thrice will I answer you.

And Thomas the doubter said, Will you truly answer me? And the jinni said, Yes!

And Thomas smiled and said, Truly? And the jinni said, Yes!

And Thomas grew grave and said, But truly? And the jinni said, Yes! and vanished.

THE END

Through Time and Space With Benedict Breadfruit: VII

THE Black Beast of Betelgeuse, although horrible in aspect, was really a very pleasant fellow when you got to know him, as Benedict Breadfruit did. But because of his alienness he was forbidden to go to Earth by a Galactic Space Lines regulation forbidding tickets to be sold to "horrible monsters".

"It's an unfair law," said the Black Beast. "You're a man of some importance, Benedict; couldn't you do something about it?"

Breadfruit nodded. "I believe I can get the reg anulled, *Bete Noir*."

—GRANDALL BARRETTON

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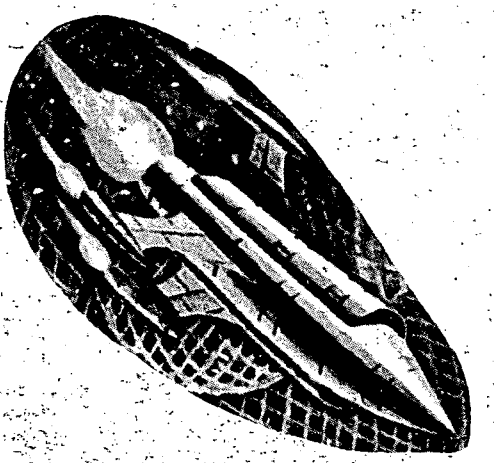

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